

A NGAWA TIBETAN NOMAD CHILDHOOD



RIN CHEN RDO RJE

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by

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I was born in a pastoral family in the autumn of 1986, in Rongrima Village, Hongyuan County, Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture,¹ Sichuan Province, PR China. When I was a child, my family lived in a 'four-column' wood house made using four poles placed in a rectangular configuration in the center of the home. Four shorter poles were behind the central columns. Four-pillar wood houses had flat roofs with several compartments, and had a skylight in the center that allowed light into the home and allowed smoke from the hearth to escape. We lived in our wood house from November to April. As flowers began to bud and calves were born, we took out our black yak-hair tent and pitched it, which announced that we would soon start moving to our camp on the open grassland where we would stay through spring, summer, and autumn.

My grandparents had already passed away by the time I was old enough to appreciate their stories. Fortunately, I learned much cultural knowledge from my parents, siblings, and others. My life is as ordinary as most Tibetans living in northern Ngawa Prefecture.

¹ Hongyuan County had a population of 40,000 in 2004. In 2007, the prefecture had a population of 873,825 of whom fifty-five percent were Tibetan, twenty-three percent were Han Chinese, and nineteen percent were Qiang (<http://www.abazhou.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/abzzfw/s4401/index.shtml>, accessed 1 May 2011).

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² All photographs were taken by Rin chen rdo rje.

³ *Tsa tsa* are a centuries-old Buddhist art found in Himalayan Buddhist regions. Votive tablets traditionally made of clay used as offerings at shrines, their iconographic forms represent meditational deities. The creation of *tsa tsa* is believed to result in great merit. Lamas may assign their students to make *tsa tsa* as preliminary practice, with 100,000 being a common number (<http://www.tsatsastudio.org/background.htm>).

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⁴ In many Tibetan areas horizontal flags (*serzam* 'golden bridges') are hung across roads and over streams to benefit all beings passing underneath, including water spirits.

⁵ A well-known mantra of Tibetan Buddhism is *om mani padme hum*, the six syllable mantra of the Bodhisattva of compassion Avalokiteshvara (Chenrizig, Guanyin).







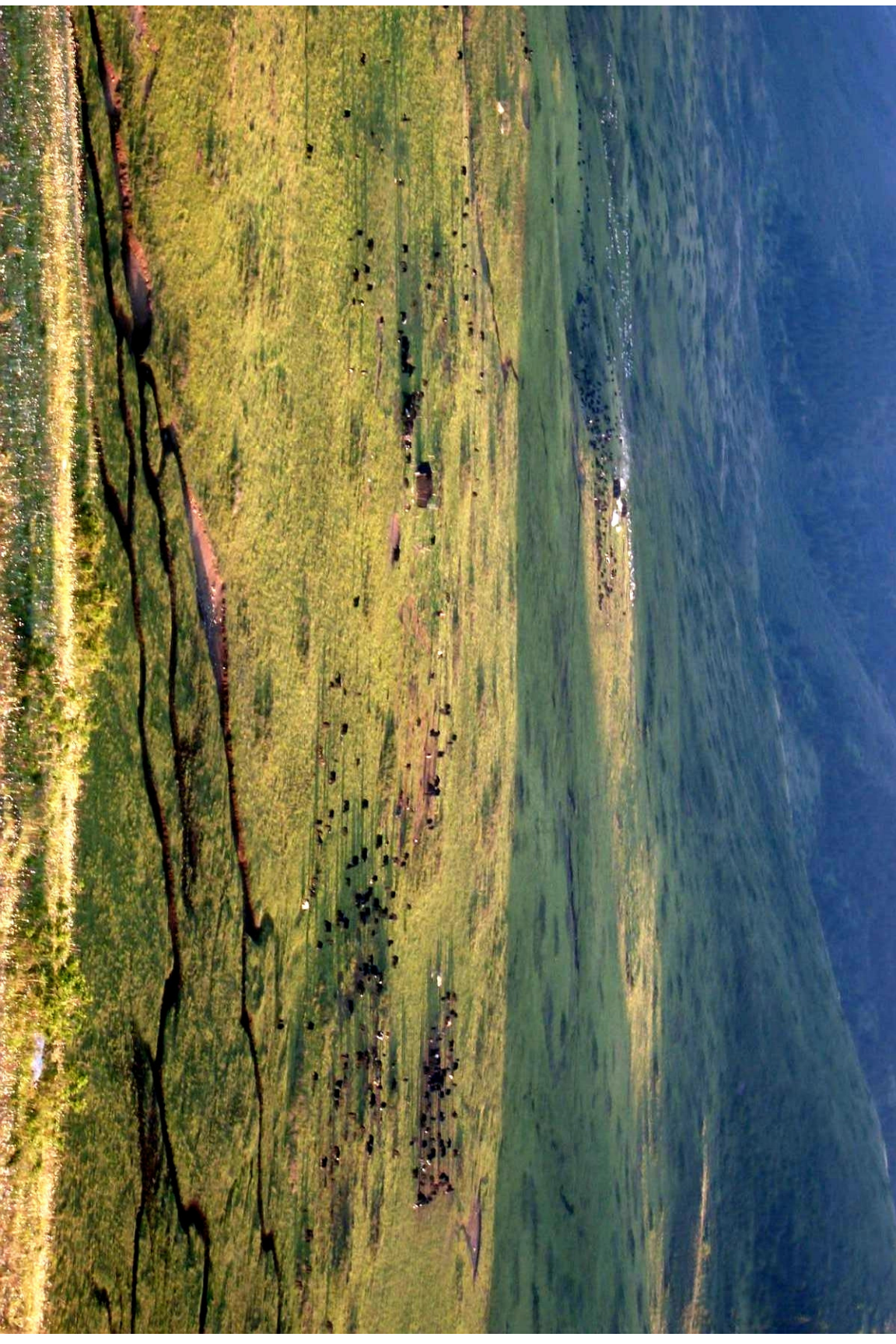




































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AN UNSEEN SIGN

Enormous shadows from dark swirling clouds danced on the emerald grassland of the Rongrima Tribe as the wind blew forcefully. Trees rocked back and forth as if about to be uprooted. Grass sighed and moaned. The hems and flaps of yak-hair tents bounced in the wind like prayer flags. Women were forced to come out and gather sunning clothes and drying cheese from near the tents. Every living human was suddenly engaged in unexpected tasks. Thunder and raindrops announced an impending violent downpour. The banks along the twisting, serpentine Labtse River were drenched by the downpour in an instant, and further harassed by earthshaking cascades of thunder and blinding bolts of crackling lightning.

"Where's the ax?" asked Nyimajid hurriedly. She was nervous and afraid. Her hair was wet from water falling through from the top of the not-so-meticulously woven yak-hair tent. Thunder and lightning continued with ferocious intensity, leaving her heart no choice but to throb far more quickly than normal. Wangchin, her husband, sat on the left side of the stove, looking uneasy. A defenseless wisp of smoke rose hopelessly and then vanished from the stove between them.

"Here you are, Nyimajid," Wangchin said. Rather than telling her where the ax was, he unsheathed his knife and passed it to her, handle first. "The ax may be somewhere outside," he added. His voice normally echoed in the tent, but now the rain swallowed it, reducing it to an uncertain whisper.

In addition to the hoe, pick, and shovel stabbed into the ground at the tent entrance, Nyimajid fiercely and solemnly thrust the knife among the tools, making the door resemble a worksite. The sky was angry, as evidenced by the fierce lightning and thunder and if the sky saw the tools and such weapons as knives – especially if they were pointed up – lightning was less prone to strike the tent. The lightning and thunder continued as people shouted and prayed to the invisible *yedam* deities. At the tent's left corner, a portable altar was neatly arranged with framed pictures of lamas and certain unknown deity figures who were not daily acquaintances. The altar was where invisible deities and protectors watched over the family, guarding them from evil.

Wangchin rose impatiently as the rain poured and walked unsteadily to the altar. He fished out a handful of conifer needles from a softened yak-hide pouch. "The lightning is terrifying," he said as he limped to the stove, bent down, and poked about for embers. The fire was almost dead. He found some embers and blew on them encouragingly, reviving them to consume the sacred leaves. As the conifer needles smoldered, releasing sinuous smoke, he murmured, clasped his palms together, and touched them to his forehead. Nyimajid, who had been looking out of the tent, glanced back inside and quickly followed suit. Raindrops had formed a little stream, and it flowed along the dust through the yak dung and food in the upper part of the tent. The bedding was now soaked. Wangchin and Nyimajid ignored it. The rain showed no sign of ceasing and continued to splatter on the tent. The Labtse River, in the blink of an eye, maddened and began roaring along its downward course.

While Nyimajid was gazing into the horsetails of rain showering down, Wangchin worriedly said, "It's going to be late, and she'll start worrying about me." Wangchin peeked out every now and again. He looked increasingly nervous and worried, even angry. A saddled, bridled horse cringed in the rain, waiting for Wangchin, like a servant.

"How about postponing the appointment until tomorrow? Mother would understand, I guess," Nyimajid said from where she squatted. The air was now damp and thick and so depressing that it hinted at mourning. For a while, silence lingered. Wangchin and Nyimajid were like two stone images.

Frowning, hunched, and cross-legged Wangchin gazed out through the tent opening. Everything remained firmly under Nature's tempestuous reign. The distant mountains were invisible, and the infinite grassland, by the force of the rain, had become a thick mist. Wangchin studied the rain through the door, considering what to do next. Deep in thought, he realized how cowardly he felt in the midst of the storm. Disgusted, he mustered his courage and tried to forget the violent thunderclaps, the zigzag lightning, and everything he feared. A true man's decision never wavers, and Wangchin had decided to leave. Nyimajid put a raincoat over his shoulders like a wife giving sword and shield to her husband, girding him for battle. Thus, heroically, with a wife's blessing, Wangchin stepped beyond the protection of the metal tools at the tent entrance, away from safety, and away from his wife. He walked alone into the fury.

Nyimajid gazed at his back, realizing his decision was based on both his obstinate disposition and filial nature. "Old people are like children; they expect their sons and daughters like children expect their fathers and mothers," she thought.

"I have the raincoat. I'll be back tomorrow," Wangchin said.

...

Wangchin had once been a stranger to the Rongrima Tribe. At first, tribal members only knew that he was from 'the east'; they were neutral in their feelings about those farmers.

Though he limped, Wangchin impressed everyone with his abilities. He could jump over a taut rope two meters above the ground and his skill at making furniture and

building houses earned him yet more fame. Even our lama praised him for his work. Despite these strong points, he carried the name 'Limping Wangchin' all his life.

It was when Wangchin suddenly married a local widow that people really began talking about him. Some said he was a murderer avoiding punishment. Others said he was just like hired yak herders in Rongrima who later married widows or the daughters of wealthy families and moved into their homes. Rongrima Tribal elders nodded their heads in approval, for it was clear to all that Nyimajid needed a man.

As the saying goes, sharp weapons are covered with rust; heroes are clad in shabby clothes. Rongrima Camp residents never took much notice of Wangchin until he challenged his young detractors. He spent days and nights enduring sarcasm and unpleasant jokes. During a horserace, Kaldan approached him and said, "Limping-Wangchin, please reveal the secret of your foot?" and laughed heartily while others jeered in support.

Wangchin rolled up his sleeves and screamed, even though he sounded like a woman. He brandished his knife and said angrily, "Come young man, let's see who goes to Hell first," and waited for Kaldan to respond. Onlookers were dumbfounded. They had never imagined Wangchin possessed such courage. Afterward, local people treated him with respect.

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A worried herder frantically hurried home the next morning with news that ignited nonstop discussion. One by one, men emerged from their tents and went to the Labtse River banks where Wangchin and his horse lay stiff, cold, and motionless. Crows made ominous, raucous sounds, flying over the pious people who hated them, especially on such an occasion. The crows perched on nearby branches and then, led by their innate proclivities, vultures appeared, scrutinizing the mourners and the bereaved Nyimajid, under their wings. Before Nyimajid could even cry out in grief, the news had

spread like a virulently contagious disease. Tents were pitched and a lama and his entourage were invited to chant scriptures for the deceased. Nyimajid lamented that she should have stopped him from leaving the tent.

It was fate that Wangchin and his horse left the world to seek another life together. How tragic. They had not had the chance to bestow even a farewell glance.

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A year after Wangchin's death, another victim was taken in exactly the same way, shocking and frightening everyone. Whispers and murmurings replaced the elders' daily chants. Fear and doubt became constant companions. The grass, the mountains, and the rivers were the same as always, but the *labtse* received more attention for it was the heart of the mountain deities and the deity whom tribal members sacrificed to.

The local leader called a meeting of the elders. After everyone had their say, it was concluded that two deaths in the same season and in the same way signified that the deities were unhappy.

"This might be the beginning of a long period of suffering, misfortune, and evil. In my whole life, never has such a thing happened," said ancient Adag, his oily face radiating sad puzzlement.

A skeletal, bandy-legged old man with a scraggly beard and forlorn face stood and said, "It is impossible to know exactly what the deities want, but maybe we need to make animal offerings." Though the tribe was not in the habit of slaughtering animals for the deities, the circumstances were such that anything merited consideration.

"I am Nyimajid's relative and helped with the funeral for her husband, Wangchin. It was so frightening. I have assisted at the funerals of many, but I never had such a feeling before. Something crept up my ankles to my spine. This matter is critical for all of us. This kind of death is rare,

and I had the feeling that his spirit was taken by the mountain deities," the old man continued.

All the elders listened alertly, exchanging frightened looks, and nodding their heads.

"Let's invite some monks to expel the evil," one said.

"Certainly, only the monastery is capable, and this must end," came a murmur and all agreed, declaring it the best course of action. Some riders left on behalf of the whole camp to invite a lama, their horses galloping, hooves trampling through tender young blades of spring grass and splashing puddled water.

Children waited for their fathers to emerge from the pass through which they had earlier vanished. Not knowing what was happening, the youngest tribe members came out of their tents periodically and gazed far into the distance, their hands above their eyebrows, waiting for candies and presents from the pouches of their fathers' robes.

Tribe members bustled about preparing for the ensuing religious ritual. Many mushroom-like tents were pitched and the venerable Hamta Lama appeared with his entourage, his mere presence giving the women a feeling of physical and mental weakness and a great need for strength and renewal. The red-cassocked entourage chanted scriptures for an entire morning, pounding drums with sticks shaped like question marks. The plump lama with an unusually fair complexion sat on a raised platform and touched the foreheads of those who queued in a long line awaiting this Buddha-given opportunity; the friction of faith between forehead and palm.

For half a day, that land was transformed into a place of great auspiciousness as the lama and his disciples fulfilled the longings of the local people, despite the heat of the scorching sun. Tribal leaders were so appreciative that they convinced everyone to give the lama one day's supply of butter and cheese. In return, the lama scribbled a list of scriptures to chant to banish the evil plaguing the tribe. Emotionally fulfilled, the thankful multitude bent their heads,

tears coursing down countless cheeks. The grand entourage departed with their gifts of butter and cheese, leaving behind much hope.

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Flowers sent out dense clouds of perfume on the grassland as swallows and waterfowl splashed in rivers and seasonal pools, leaving ripples. Occasionally, fish leapt from the water to catch fragile insects hovering above the surface. Frogs bathed in these same pools and then sunned themselves in the pools and on rocks. The vast plains were dotted with tents and prayer flags, scattered livestock, and herds of prancing, high-spirited horses and cavorting colts and calves. It was only in July that the grassland was so beautiful. The grassland's beauty would ebb away as autumn approached, to be replaced by yet another fabulous scene, further proving the truth of impermanence and constant change.

It was a quiet morning. The sun shyly wiggled through a veil of widely scattered clouds. The grassland was briefly beautified, covered by crystal dewdrops, soon to vanish with the slightest disturbance. Scarves of smoke floated above the gleaming dew. Among the hills and along the calmly flowing Labtse River, horses and yaks grazed leisurely without a care in the world. Weather-beaten tents lined the river and women milked in yak enclosures.

After milking diligently the whole morning, Lhari untied the yaks. She was encased in the strong odor of milk and yak dung. The gray fabric apron that covered the front of her robe was stained with mud, dirt, and dried milk. The apron had once been black. Even though her lustrous hair was uncombed, her beauty was unrivaled. This 'Flower' of the Rongrima Tribe had sparkling eyes, long eyelashes, and enchanting wing-like eyebrows. Her fair, delicate complexion, however, hinted at accumulating wrinkles of age; and her amiable smile was seldom seen since that terrible event that took Wangchin's life. Thinking about her past, Lhari stood in the yak enclosure motionlessly, detached

from all around her.

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"You look pale. Are you all right?" Dorjee asked with great tenderness and affection while they waited for a bus by the road. It was before dawn and they had crossed the Rongrima Tribe's territory. The stars winked out as they waited and an unfamiliar place began forming before their eyes.

"I'm a little worried. I'm married with five children," Lhari answered bashfully, her head down. Suddenly, she realized she had not thought about her children and family while plotting to elope with Dorjee, her lover.

Dorjee pulled her into his arms gently and whispered in her ear, "Thoughts of them will vanish like fog when we arrive there, I promise." As if stuck together, they waited for the bus, tightly holding each other. They remained silent for a long while. Dogs barked in the distance, the barks echoing again in the valleys. They constantly looked at the dusty road that stretched from the mountains.

"I'm not sure if we must do this. It's been some years since we began our relationship and nothing unpleasant has happened," Lhari said finally, her head in his arms. The thought of her family now came to her and put her on the horns of a dilemma – to return to her family or elope with Dorjee, the man whose charms, muscular body, and handsome smile had proved irresistible. He was the man she truly loved.

"Dear, you are right, but do think about me? I'm tired of visiting you surreptitiously. Sooner or later, he will find out about us," Dorjee reasoned, gazing at her pale, lovely face. Dorjee had met Lhari five years ago and a secret relationship had soon ensued, creating constant fear in Lhari's heart that her husband would discover the relationship.

"Dear, if we go back now, it will ruin us. What would we gain?" said Dorjee, trying to convince her. And then, without giving her a chance to reply, a horn blared and the

bus rolled into view. Lhari, halting at every step and staring at Dorjee with hesitation, finally boarded the bus.

It was too late to turn back when Lhari realized the thoughtlessness of her deeds; she had left her home, her family, her yaks, her mountains, her five children, and her husband. She had left them all for her lover. The thought of her children made her feel guilty. The love and tenderness Dorjee showed her gave her just enough confidence to confront reality. Absent-mindedly and indecisively she had followed Dorjee to a faraway place where they came to lead a simple, peaceful life until...

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Morning dew sparkled on grass tips before being shaken off by careless animals. A cool breeze wakened Lhari from her memories. Since returning, she fully comprehended the indestructible love she had for her children. She had betrayed them once, and was now determined to make amends. A brighter future seemed ahead of her.

As if an unmoving stone image had miraculously come to life, Lhari mechanically bent forward and picked up a milk bucket. As she walked unsteadily to the tent, she saw that the sun was still behind thick, fluffy curtains of cloud. A combination of humid air and twisting smoke lingered above the tents along the river and valleys. With the equal chance of it turning into a rainy or sunny day, the sun sat uneasily on its perch in the eastern mountains. Tilting her body to counterbalance the weight of the full milking bucket, Lhari entered the tent.

At around noon, a blistering-hot sun shone in a vast blue sky devoid of even a single cloud. Some of Lhari's yaks quenched their thirst in the nearby rivers; others swished their tails in the yak enclosure, and others occasionally raced across the pasture, trying to evade flies intent on biting them. The family watchdog, shaded by a dead, forked tree on which hung a woven yak-hair blanket, panted desperately, its scarlet tongue lolling. Out of the burning sun, Lhari and her

children relaxed with the tent edges raised. Like a dying man breathing with effort, tiny trailers of brittle smoke rose through the sunrays that shone into the tent flap. The family gathered on one side of the tent out of the sun. Happiness and laughter defined the atmosphere. Her children tickled each other and showed off their cleverness with such riddles as, "What has no eyes but digs a hole?" Time passed happily without heed of the outside world.

At first, the cool breeze that carried the fragrance of summer flowers was soothing and comforting, but things rarely stay as one wants. The breeze became colder and stronger, and the fragrance of newly opened flowers vanished. Disturbing the cozy, nested family, the wind began to shriek and the grass grumbled. The grassland and the mountains were covered by the shadows of clouds forming angry clusters above. Thunder bellowed in the distance and paced toward the tribal settlement. Flashes of lightning joined force with fierce winds and threatened to swallow the camp. Lhari promptly lowered the tent flaps that had been lifted up and collected sunning clothes and bedding from tent ropes. Rain relentlessly and violently pelted the earth a short while later.

The children cringed in fear in the upper part of the tent as forked lightning and exploding thunder continued. On the corner of a bed, they stuck their fingers in their ears, shut their eyes, and pulled quilts over their heads. Although the space was crowded, hunkering together made them feel safer. Lhari stabbed knives and anything that could be used as a weapon into the ground to protect them from the lightning. Fearing the angry weather, she leaned against a main tent pole. Recalling what had happened to Wangchin, her mind vacillated between hope and fear.

The rain poured down as if a giant faucet in the sky had been turned on. Lightning streaked across the dark sky as thunder pounded the tent and the earth. Suddenly, a jagged, dazzling, serpentine fork of lightning zigzagged into the tent, and with a thud, Lhari was thrown to the ground. Ignorant of

what was happening, a child asked from under the quilt, "What's that sound, Mother?"

"Listen, it's over now," one boy said, sticking his head out from under the quilts.

"Mother! Mother!" the first one yelled and the others joined as, one by one, they emerged from the bed.

Lhari never replied.

The elders again whispered and murmured... "A woman who deserted her children and husband deserves it."

"Fate is inevitable, we can do nothing." ...

The local people seemed like rocks and stones, peeking and murmuring from a distance about reasons. That was the tribe.

The world seemed fresh and translucent after the rain. Dust and stains on the flowers were washed away and the clouds were nowhere to be seen. Like a boy sneaking a quick look at his parents from a window, the sun shone guiltily above the shoulders of the western mountains. Birds chirped and flapped. The surroundings were as majestically beautiful as Lhari's charming face had once been.

The bereaved children mourned in the beautiful, dwindling sunrays, as dusk rapidly approached. Tears trickled into small rivers that coursed down each child's face. Forlorn, uncontrollable wails roused the souls of the deceased. Now, as the whole tribe began to be blanketed in boundless, deepening darkness, fear and worry grew in the children.

Rin chen Rdo rje writes:

I wrote *An Unseen Sign* based on events in Rongrima Village, Jiangrong Township, Hongyuan County, Ngawa Prefecture, Sichuan Province. These events frightened local villagers and made their hearts uneasy. Though it is hard to know if what happened was mere coincidence or related to mountain deities, it was very unexpected and

unusual. I wrote this story to remember the lives that we lost due to unseen forces.

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PILGRIMAGE TO LHASA

I was having a nice dream when my mother, Degkardron, woke Brother and me. We were sleeping naked on softened sheepskin, our heads on a Tibetan robe. She removed Father's big sheepskin robe that covered us. Mother was in her thirties and had risen early to boil water and prepare what we needed for our two-month journey. She encouraged us to get dressed, realizing we were still sleepy. I whimpered complaints, wanting to return to my tranquil sleep.

"You won't be able to see Lhasa if you sleep like this. Go see if the truck is coming," she said as we sleepily rubbed our eyes.

After hearing this, I suddenly stood up in bed, looked directly into her eyes, and asked in excited bewilderment, "What did you say, Mother? Are we leaving for Lhasa today?"

Mother replied, "Get dressed and go see if the truck is coming."

"OK, Mother," Brother said, and quickly threw on his clothes. He looked at me and told me to get ready. I followed his example. We went outside to find a cold, foggy morning. Our little community was enveloped in a mist that allowed little visibility. Only some women who had risen early to kindle fires and fetch water moved about. Smoke plumes swirled from the chimneys of certain households, and then

vanished in the wind.

We stood along a road that stretched into the dark, infinite grassland, cheerfully enduring the bitter wind that seemed to pierce our bones and that soon numbed my toes. Brother rubbed his hands together and occasionally put his fingertips in his mouth for warmth. The grassland between the houses was encased in crystal morning frost, and the narrow muddy paths were icy and slippery. Since we could see no trucks, we returned home, rushed to the hearth, and began warming ourselves. Seeing us too close to the hearth, Mother joked while busying herself in the *yado*,⁶ "You boys are like vultures on a corpse."

"You don't understand, Mother. The cold is unbearable outside, and the truck isn't coming," Brother responded.

"I see," Mother said. A bit later she brought out a bag and fished out our new clothes. I forgot the pain in my toes and fingers. Wearing new clothes was a happy time for me because we could not afford to buy new clothes every year. We were only allowed to wear them on such special occasions as the Tibetan New Year and The Great Prayer Festival.⁷

Brother wore a blue velvet jacket with white stripes on the shoulder, and a pair of red trousers above fabric shoes. An irrepressible smile beamed from his face as he stood in his new clothes. I felt jealous of such handsome clothes. My red bombazine jacket was new, but the blue pants were hand-me-downs from Brother, who was two years older than I. The black shoes I had on were faded since I had worn them the previous New Year.

"Mother, it's not fair. Everything he's got is new," I sulked.

⁶ A *yado* is a wood platform in the upper part of a tent where a family's food supplies are kept.

⁷ An important annual Tibetan Buddhist festival.

Mother looked at me worriedly and said, "Dear son, that is true, but your father plans to buy you better clothes when we reach Lhasa."

I nodded in agreement.

While we were busy talking and getting ready, a horse neighed outside, which made us all hold our breath for a second. Brother and I rushed out, jostling each other in the narrow doorway. It was Uncle Winba, Father, and our sisters who had all come from the pasture. They were dismounting as we got outside. Father smiled as he tied his horse to a wood stake. I noticed he was still wearing his old robe and black fabric hat. My sisters, in contrast, were attired in beautiful clothes and decorated with necklaces of coral-like jewels. Their gorgeous, new Tibetan robes were tied with colorful sashes. Again, I felt jealous and thought my parents were treating me unfairly.

"Big Earlobes, are you excited about going to Lhasa?" Uncle asked, using my nickname. I was used to this name because of our intimate relationship. "You look terrific in that jacket," Uncle said, pulling my ear. I was glad somehow, but I kept the happiness and pride in my heart. He was bald except for a few curly hairs around his ball-like head. He was short and funny-looking. Compared to Father, Uncle seemed to be more like Father's son than his brother.

"Uncle, are you going with us?" I asked, thinking it would be great to have his company.

"No, I'm going to see you off and take these horses home. We can't leave them tied for two months," Uncle said humorously. Like Charlie Chaplin, whom he resembled, my uncle was naturally gifted at telling jokes and doing funny things.

Uncle's exuberance made Father laugh. "When Balden Tsering returns from school, he sometimes forgets to tie the horse. You can leave a table untied in the classroom but horses need to be tied here," he chortled. "Now let's go inside. It's cold out here."

Brother and I had a quick breakfast since we were in high spirits and were hoping to set off soon. During tea, I learned other pilgrims were going with us. I wondered if Gawi Lodro, one of my closest winter playmates, was among the pilgrims. He was a nice little monk. Sometimes I felt he was closer to me than Brother. During breakfast, I sat on Father's lap, my cozy and most comfortable seat. "Father, is Gawi Lodro coming with us?" I asked, holding his neck with both hands affectionately.

"Probably, I'm not sure," he replied looking into my eyes. It was clear to Father what I wanted.

"I hope he will come. I like him," I said.

"But you have your brother to play with. And there are other boys, also," Father said, stroking my head, trying to console me.

"Father, you don't understand. Brother doesn't listen to me when we play. He is disobedient," I said. Maybe I was the youngest and spoiled. I had to play the important roles in games, and others were supposed to listen to me.

Father burst into laughter and said, "Sounds like you are monopolizing the king's throne."

I smiled at Father since I didn't understand. I felt uneasy somehow. I wanted to say something but didn't. On the right side of the hearth, Mother and my sisters were eating.

"My boy, you're getting heavier day by day. This means you're growing up," Father said, suggesting I move from his lap.

"Degkardron, is everything ready?" Father inquired. "The truck will come soon. It is almost the time he promised to arrive." Father stood and looked at what Mother had prepared.

"Yeah, I think so. If we need to take the tent, it is in that sack," Mother said. "Just take it outside."

"I'll do that," said Brother, rolling up his sleeves. He held his breath, grabbed the sack in his arms, and tried to lift

it but failed to budge it. His face reddened. The triumphant look he had worn when he rolled up his sleeves immediately vanished. Since I had witnessed his failure, he shouted at me, "Blacky, you lift it if you think you can do better!"

I timidly raised my head to look at Father and found the usual smile on his face. "Control your anger. It's not a man's work to get angry with his brother. You will pick up this tent one day and so will your younger brother," Father instructed. My limited strength and courage stopped me from trying to lift the sack. I saw Brother was unhappy in not getting to see me fail, reluctantly went to where Mother was sitting, and sulked.

Father carried the sack out by himself. I resisted the urge to follow Father, knowing Brother would scold me. The weather was improving. The sun still hid behind the ebbing clouds on the east mountains, beaming bright rays through cracks in the clouds. Smoke floated in the sky without the disturbance of the wind. Morning birds began chirping on tree branches. The chill was gone. The abrupt change in temperature was wonderful.

"Renchin," Father called.

I ran to Father, expecting something exciting. "What do you want me to do?" I asked, panting.

"Help your brother watch for the truck," he said. He then turned to talk to Uncle. Their conversation was endless, and I was in a hurry to set off. I feared that Brother would scold me as we went together to check on the truck's arrival, but since we possessed the same hope and desire, Brother restrained his anger.

When we reached the road, we found people in groups with their belongings. Holding prayer wheels, elders stood in the bright sunshine and seemed also to be waiting for the truck. Some were lying on what they had brought. Children were discussing the journey with what little information their parents had provided. I surreptitiously searched for Gawi Lodro among the children and was

disappointed by his absence.

Brother and I waited, but the truck didn't come. As we were about to leave, children stopped talking among themselves, rushed towards their parents, and shouted, "The truck's coming!" We then saw a truck rolling along the dirt road, sending swirls of dust into the sky.

Without hesitation, we rushed home, yelling, "The truck is coming! The truck is coming!" Because of their maturity, the adults ignored our eagerness. I was a little angry. Their slow, gentle behavior vexed me, and I wondered if Brother was feeling the same. Finally, I said to myself, "Anyway, we are going today."

CARSICK

"Renchin, let's go meet the driver," Father said as he came out of the house.

"OK, Father," I agreed. The joy I felt about going to Lhasa was more than I could describe, and holding Father's fingers made me even happier. We went to meet the driver together while Brother stayed with Uncle.

We saw a big, blue truck with side mirrors that stuck out like ears, surrounded by a crowd. They were astonished with such a machine and discussed its huge windshield, tires, and other aspects.

"Can it really carry us all?" I asked, looking at Father.

"Certainly! Don't worry," Father said.

"Then why don't we buy a truck like this, Father?" I asked. Father said nothing but walked through the crowd, taking me with him.

The driver, a dark, stout man with short hair, wore leather pants and a leather jacket. He sat comfortably behind the steering wheel. A much younger man sat by the driver's seat, cautiously observing the people. He had deep-socketed eyes and was very thin. There were only two seats in the

front of the truck. I wondered how we could visit Lhasa in such a truck. It had a gigantic bed that I later found was where we would sit.

Father stepped to the window and murmured to the driver, who pushed the door open and stepped out. The astonished crowd became still. "Get in the truck if your things are at home. We'll get them now," said the driver, shading his eyes from the sun with his right hand.

Everybody said they had brought their things.

"Thanks very much," Father said to the driver.

"It seems you are the only lazy guy here," the driver joked and gestured for us to get inside.

We piled in the front. I was told to sit on Father's lap. As always, Father simplified work for my sisters by asking the driver to drive to our house. The driver started the truck and the crowd scattered in every direction to make way. Once the truck moved, I felt I was in a dream. It seemed I was flying in the air and the grass and flowers visible through the big window vanished in a blink.

It was too hot inside, and I was soon sweating, my clothes sticking to my body. Adding to my discomfort, an unpleasant, pungent smell made me put my right hand over my face to block the odor. I got out immediately after the truck stopped at our gate. The earth was rolling, making me stagger and lurch right and left. I wanted to vomit. I was like a drunkard. I knew what was happening, but it was difficult to control myself. The dizziness ultimately won and I fell to the ground with a thud. The earth kept moving. My head was about to explode in pain. I could not stand up and felt low-spirited and fragile. A woman helped me up and sprinkled water on my face. Slowly I began to feel better.

"Mother, I'm not going to Lhasa in this truck," I said decisively.

"Dear son, you'll get used to it," Mother said.

"I would rather ride a horse to Lhasa, Mother," I said.

"You will get old going by horseback. Lhasa is just

too far," Mother said.

Before long, the driver suggested we get back in the truck. My sisters climbed in without hesitation.

"I'm not going in this dirty truck," I said.

"Don't worry, RENCHIN, we won't sit in the front and there are also other boys here," Father persuaded and started to lift me up.

"Don't touch me," I yelled at Father tearfully, wriggling.

"OK," despaired Father. "A man never acts like this. I am ashamed of having a boy behave like this in front of others."

I wanted to be a brave man, so when Father said he was ashamed of having a son like me, it motivated me to get on the truck. Father lifted Brother and me into the truck. Although the bed was open, it was more comfortable than being in the cab. There was no smell or heat. I sat next to my parents quietly as my sisters murmured to one another.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The truck began moving and elders prayed to the mountain deities and Buddha to grant us a safe journey. When we reached the outskirts of town, people threw wind-horses⁸ and chanted various scriptures. Elders spun prayer wheels and murmured the Six Sacred Syllables. I, not knowing what to do, watched these pious people carefully. I could feel that we were being watched over to prevent obstacles throughout our journey.

"Boys, put on your robes, otherwise you'll get cold,"

⁸ *Longda* are small pieces of paper featuring Buddhist scriptures and depictions of such animals as a tiger, dragon, phoenix, and lion, as well as a horse carrying a wish-fulfilling jewel.

Mother suggested, fishing our robes out from a sack.

"OK. Mother, when will we reach Lhasa?" Brother asked, donning his robe.

"The driver knows. I'm sure we won't arrive tomorrow," Mother answered. Our sisters were sitting beside Mother, trying to sleep. I thought it would be difficult to sleep in the truck, disturbed by the wind and other noises.

The truck bed was uncovered, but everyone seemed prepared to face rain, heat, and wind. A single long, gray dusty road stretched into the ocean-like grassland. Our truck ran at breakneck speed. The wind and clean air refreshed me. While elders crouched in the truck, some of my peers and I stood, stretching our hands out, letting our hair blow in the wind. We shouted, screamed, and laughed together. It was more fun than sitting and doing nothing. I leaned over the side and watched the wheels turn. Mother worried when she saw this, grabbed my hand, and told me to sit by her. But, being the youngest and spoiled, I did not listen. My peers laughed as I argued with Mother. I thought I was doing something amusing and felt victorious. There is always a limitation to a hero's courage and I dared not jump from the truck, but I did consider it.

Dundrub was one of my most spoiled and mischievous friends. We often frightened our parents with our fearlessness. He was about my size, easygoing, vigorous, and his hair was cut straight across his forehead.

We stopped every day at dusk. The first day, we stopped at a riverbank close to the sash-like road. There were mountains ranges on either side. Parents told their children to collect yak dung, wood, and shrubs for fuel and praised those who found the most. I thought about eating *tsamba* and drinking milk tea while collecting. How much fuel we found depended on where we stopped. If we stopped adjacent to a herder's community, the hems of our Tibetan robes soon bulged with yak dung. If we stopped by bushes or a forest, bundles of wood filled our arms. I was praised only once,

and I felt guilty for not being more adept at gathering fuel.

Our camp was simple: two tents and the truck. Father and other men pitched the tents, while women fetched water. We usually camped by a riverbank.

"Will you bring me a white stone?" old Jyambal asked, leaning on his cane. He was the oldest of the pilgrims, bald, bandy-legged, and dressed in a sheepskin robe.

"Sure! What for?" I asked.

"You'll know soon," he said and smiled. I willingly agreed and went off to collect fuel.

When Dundrub and I got back, old Jyambal was waiting in front of his tent's entrance.

"Did you?" he asked, stretching out his big wrinkled hand. I remembered that I had forgotten to bring him a white stone. This time I smiled in return, rushed to the riverbank, found a very white stone, ran back, and gave it to him, panting. He took it with a warm smile.

"This is a good one. I'll keep it throughout our journey," he said.

"What will you do with a white stone?" I asked.

"Come with me boys," he said and took us inside the tent. It was getting dark. We could see each other's faces only dimly. Our hearth was three big stones in a triangle that we could put a pot on and make a fire under. It was much warmer than a real stove. Old Jyambal sat by the stones, broke tiny branches, put them in the middle of the stones, pointed to a *tsamba* bag, and said, "Give me that bag." He fished a cloth out from the dried cheese bag and put some butter on the cloth. I was puzzled.

"What are you doing Jyambal?" I asked.

Although he was the eldest, he was very agile and adept in doing such things.

"Watch me, boys!" he said and took out a clean polished, rectangular piece of metal fastened to a tiny pouch made of yak hide. Something inside the pouch resembled gray cotton. He put a little of the cotton-like thing on his lap,

picked up the white stone, and struck it with the metal by the cotton. There were sparks as the two objects met. Soon, the cotton thing was smoldering, and old Jyambal put it under the dry, small pieces of kindling between the stones. Afterward, he wedged the oily cloth between the dry wood above the cotton-like thing. The cloth shortly caught fire, lighting our tent. I was fascinated by Old Jyambal's ability.

"What is it?" Dundrub asked, "How did you do that?" Dundrub and I had similar personalities. We were naturally inquisitive and curious about things we had not seen before.

He showed us the metal and said, "You need a rock, tinder, and flint or you can't make a fire."

"But we use matches," one boy said.

Old Jyambal calmly responded, "It's true that new things come from outside and replace our own things. People like them, because they are cheap and convenient. But the problem is you will not know about many things that your parents used, like this," and then he showed us his *mecha* and smiled kindly.

The fire was dancing as its scarlet flames emitted warmth in the tent. Everyone relaxed and was at ease. The long journey had exhausted them. I found my family members, since I had not seen them for some hours. The driver and his friend were with my family. I guessed they were Father's friends. Saying nothing, I joined them. Brother angrily glared at me when I appeared. Father was pleased with my ability to make friends and talk to elders. As usual, I sat on his lap.

"You mischievous, spoiled boy," the driver said. Then he turned to Father and said, "Is he the youngest?"

Father nodded.

"No wonder he acts like this," said the driver. I gazed at them occasionally. They continued to talk about me over tea. I heard them repeatedly calling me "he" and became upset.

"A man has a name, and a teapot has a handle. Don't

call me 'he', I am Renchin!" I shouted in one breath.

The guests laughed heartily.

Father said harshly, "Don't talk to people like that!"

However, my rude intrusion into the conversation led to a later friendship. They were pleased to know me, and I also enjoyed staying with them. They loved my innocence and straightforwardness. I also introduced Dundrub to them.

Namchin, the driver, was friendly to me, but stern to his helper. I learned that night that they were brothers. Namchin joked that I had deep-socketed eyes like his brother's, and also his brother's high spirits. I was pleased by that.

"Jyambal, please add more wood to the fire," I said. I found I could make funny shadows on the tent wall with my hands. I played, making shadows of animals and scary shapes. Later, both Brother and Dundrub joined me. We made shadows of rabbits, horses, turtles, and other things. While we played joyfully, the elders laughed merrily, and now and then taught us how to make new animal shadows. They had also tasted this happy childhood. I was happy that night, Brother was no longer angry with me, and Dundrub was as active as a rabbit.

That night, our driver and some people slept in the truck, and some slept in the tents. I reckoned it would be unpleasant to sleep in the truck, but the boys who did sleep there related long, admirable stories the next day. Brother and I slept with Father under his big Tibetan robe. We kept the tent flap open in order to see the magnificent night scene. The sky was clear and full of eye-catching, sparkling stars. Fresh and gentle breezes blew in and kept me awake.

"Father, please tell us an interesting story," I pleaded. Whenever I could not fall asleep, I listened to Father's stories. I was used to it because Grandpa had told me stories when I was younger.

"No, not tonight," Father said, longing for a sound, relaxing sleep, but I insisted. After a long pause, he related

this story:

Back in the time of our great-great grandparents, a man named Dugbum lived in Rongri Village. He was tall, strong, and clever. People liked him because he was kind and helpful. There was a valley half full of forest in which a female ghost who ate whatever came to that valley lived. The ghost was so huge that she carried one of her breasts over her shoulder while the other dragged along as she walked. She could swallow a horse in one gulp. People could do nothing against her, and our ancestors' livestock steadily decreased in number.

One day, Dugbum's sister noticed some yaks were missing. Taking his gun and dagger, Dugbum rode his horse, looking everywhere except in the valley where the ghost lived. Finally he thought, "The ghost must have eaten them. I will have vengeance tonight." With determination and composure, Dugbum rode into the valley that was full of danger as darkness blanketed the earth. He could not see clearly and a cold shudder ran down his spine. Dugbum then tied his horse and walked into the valley half full of forest. He had no intention of finding the lost yaks. Instead, he wanted to meet the ghost and take revenge. After wandering in the forest for a long while, Dugbum saw a fire and went to it, thinking that he had found a place to spend the night.

Dugbum approached and found a beautiful woman near a hut by the fire. Her long hair hung over her shoulders. She had enchanting eyes, a flowerlike smile, and a fair complexion. Dugbum had never seen such a beauty before. If there was a flaw in her beauty, it was her extraordinarily long fingernails. She greeted Dugbum hospitably and kindly. They chatted about this and that. Dugbum had already forgotten about the ghost and his vows. She served him meat, and he enjoyed it. Then, when

she poured him tea, Dugbum noticed there was blood in his bowl. He suddenly realized that he was with the notorious ghost whom villagers talked about every day. Dugbum was then afraid of the beautiful woman and hated her, but pretended he did not know she was a ghost. He stealthily prepared the weapons he had brought and said to himself, "I will pull her heart out tonight."

By then, I was a bit scared. I imagined an invincible ghost nearby waiting for a chance to devour me. My hair stood up on my head and I imagined that my surroundings were full of ghosts. I moved nearer Father until I could feel the warmth of his body. Knowing we were frightened, Father asked, "Are you scared? The dangerous part is still ahead."

"No, not at all. What's next?" I managed to reply.

Father continued:

Then, they slept. The ghost slept in the hut, and Dugbum slept by the fire. Dugbum knew what to do next. He got up surreptitiously, made the bed look like he was inside, put a teapot on the pillow so it resembled his head, and then waited behind a nearby tree. At midnight, the monster slowly came out from the hut. She was no longer beautiful. Her breasts were as large as people said, and her mouth was smudged with blood. The once lovely hair was now disheveled and messy. Praying to the Three Jewels⁹ and mountain deities, Dugbum held his rifle and waited for his chance. The ghost neared Dugbum's bed and attacked. Dugbum carefully aimed at her heart and fired. She roared and fell on her back as trees and the earth shook, disturbing every living creature in the forest. Dugbum

⁹ Buddhists take refuge in the Three Jewels (Triple Gem, Three Treasures, Three Refuges) – the Buddha, Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha), and Sangha (the community of practicing Buddhists).

strode over to the dying ghost and loaded his gun. He thought she was dead but, to Dugbum's amazement, she snatched his gun and grabbed his neck in one quick movement.

"I can regain my strength with your blood, little man," she said. Dugbum was nearly strangled by the giant ghost.

Praying to his protector deities and the local mountain deities, he said, "This is for everyone you have tortured. Now go to Hell," pulled his dagger out, and stabbed her in the heart, killing the notorious ghost whom everybody feared. He thus brought peace to local people and their livestock.

When I woke up the next morning, my companions had already taken down the tent and were enjoying breakfast around an open fire. I lay in bed for some time and looked at the sky. It was still dark. Shimmering stars were scattered all over the sky. The moon was on the shoulders of the mountains to the West. It seemed to be resting for a moment, saying good-bye to the world. A cool breeze drove away my drowsiness and refreshed my mind.

I draped myself in my Tibetan robe without tying it at the waist and went to join my family for breakfast. The elders were sitting cross-legged around the fire, sipping tea and discussing the weather, something we are always concerned with since our lives are so closely related to nature. I headed directly to Father and sat on his lap, ignoring the others.

"Nymdrin, make *thuma*¹⁰ for Renchin, please!" Father said.

"Fine," she said, followed by "Lazy boy!" but she gave me a bowl of very nice *thuma* with melting butter

¹⁰ *Thuma* is a mixture of barley flour, yak-milk cheese, butter, hot water or tea, and sometimes sugar.

spreading out in flower shapes on the surface of the hot liquid. As I slowly drank the tea atop my *thuma*, my companions left one by one, and finally only Brother and I remained. I ate *thuma* with my right forefinger, which I called 'the natural chopstick'.

Brother stood by me and kept saying, "Be quick, they're getting in the truck." "They're starting the engine," and so on. It was like he trying to make me nervous. After I finished eating, I began burping. My Tibetan robe was hanging over me, I was holding my bowl in one hand, and my sash in the other hand. I was so nervous that I didn't know what to do next. Brother snatched the dragon-decorated bowl from me and said, "Please, tie your robe! You look like a beggar."

"OK, Brother, wait a bit," I said as I tied the sash. He anxiously looked at the truck. It seemed they might leave us. Once I finished, we ran to the waiting truck and climbed in, feeling comfortable among the pilgrims.

The smell of gasoline was awful. Every time the truck stopped and started, I could smell that awful odor. I noticed all of the pilgrims were unhappy with that smell and many put their robe collars over their noses to block the smell.

It was daybreak, and the sun was still in the arms of the eastern mountains. All the stars had vanished. I looked back as the truck moved forward, leaving behind serpentine, grayish smoke curling around the mountains. Our camp looked warm as the fire still burned between the three stones. Plumes of smoke rose skyward. Extra fuel remained in keeping with the old saying, "A good camp leaves fuel; a bad camp leaves excrement."

We were again on the rough, dusty, twisting road. Sometimes, the road was so rough that it seemed we might tumble out. The elders prayed to Lord Buddha and their mountain deities for protection. With palms together, they put their hands on their foreheads, closed their eyes, and

continually chanted the Six Sacred Syllables, spinning prayer wheels in their hands, and tossing wind-horses.

We stopped near some bushes on the second night. I was sitting with my friend, Old Jyambal. Dundrub and Brother came running up and said that they had something interesting. I jumped up and followed them.

"There is a magpie nest in that bush. I think eggs are inside," Brother said as we walked to the bush.

I remembered Mother telling me to cover my mouth whenever I watched eggs or baby birds, or their mother would know that somebody has seen them and then abandon them. "It will be OK if we cover our mouths," I thought.

"Oh, gosh! The tree is so big, and the nest is high up there, how can we see inside it?" I said, looking up.

"Just watch," Dundrub said, and he began climbing the tree. I thought it was impossible to climb that tree, but he succeeded. When he reached the nest, Dundrub stretched out his head, his mouth covered with his right hand. He peeked inside, and blurted out, "Nothing," as Brother and I were about to ask what was inside.

"But I will show you guys another mystery," Brother said and also climbed the tree adeptly. He rode on a tree branch and told me to climb up to him.

"I can't. It's too high," I said and started crying. The sun was ebbing and it grew darker in the bushes. I thought I would never be able to see the magpie nest.

"Tie your sash around your waist with one end and give me the other end. I'll pull you up as you climb," Brother suggested. But when I finished, another problem followed.

"Brother, the sash is too short to reach you," I said, frustrated and disappointed.

"Take your sash and tie it to mine," yelled Brother in annoyance. Although I always felt I was cleverer than him, I had to admit that without this suggestion, I would have been unable to see the magpie nest.

Finally, I did climb the tree and cautiously rested by

Brother and Dundrub, since the tree branch was shaking. Brother smiled when he started to reveal the next mystery. "Look! I will pick a square stone out of the nest. I'm a magician," he said, closed his eyes, and murmured. His hands were waving slowly in the air. Dundrub and I had no idea what he was doing and we watched him closely.

A moment later, he calmly opened his eyes and took a square stone from the nest. It was under the sticks where the magpies slept. "A real magician does not deceive people," Brother said. For some reason, a square stone was in most magpie nests, but it was too heavy to be carried by a magpie. This has always puzzled me.

"Who put a stone here?" Dundrub inquired, his eyes were as wide open as two big windows.

"Nobody," Brother answered hoarsely.

"How come it's here?" I asked.

"Actually, I, Magician Tenzen Tsering, put the stone here," Brother proudly said. I was convinced that Brother was no longer ordinary.

I looked around and felt anxious to leave. It was getting darker. "It's time for us to go back," I said to my magician-brother and Dundrub. Brother nodded in answer. Usually he taught me many things using made-up stories, and it was he that I deeply and eternally admired and appreciated. We put our robes back on and returned to our camp, where everybody was relaxing.

"Don't tell anybody that we saw a nest," Brother whispered as we approached camp.

"OK. I'll zip my lips, Brother," I promised.

The sun's dying, golden rays were beautiful. Everything on the grassland was clothed in the color of a fading sun. Trees, mountains, and rivers were motionless in the quiet dusk.

THE LAST NIGHT

We confronted wild weather in some areas. Mid-Autumn was cold and harsh, like a merciless torturer, tormenting us with rain, wind, and heat. Faith in Lord Buddha encouraged us onwards. Pious people are always his loyal subjects. Enduring the natural challenges, we journeyed for almost two weeks.

Old Jyambal sat near the flaming fire on the last night of our journey, turning his prayer wheel in his right hand, holding prayer beads in his left hand, and chanting the Six Sacred Syllables nonstop. I sat by him quietly, so as not to disturb him. My playmates were now with their parents. Brother sat by Mother asking the distance to our destination. I liked watching Old Jyambal chant prayers. He was calm and detached from everything around him, rendering the atmosphere serene and still.

"What do you have on your mind?" Old Jyambal asked, reading my mind, knowing what I was thinking – we longed to reach Lhasa quickly, but Lhasa seemed to be on another planet or to be receding from us. Elders told us we would reach Lhasa soon, but this seemed a falsehood.

"I'm curious about Lhasa. Does it really exist?" I asked. I wondered if Lhasa was a legendary land like Ling.¹¹ Before we had started our journey, I was somehow attracted by Lhasa's reputation and holiness, but once I felt it was unreachable, I became suspicious about its existence and hated Lhasa, that unreachable destination.

"Uh...uh...we should not say such things about Lhasa. It's not auspicious," Old Jyambal said, putting his palms together on his forehead and murmuring. I felt uneasy because I had said what I had kept in my mind for a long time and had not expected such a reaction.

¹¹ The Kingdom of Ling is frequently mentioned in Gesar epics.

"Renchin, never say that again. Never! Lhasa is the holy place of our black-haired Tibetans. No man ever criticizes Lhasa for the distance and hardship they endure to reach it. Be faithful to this pilgrimage, OK?" Old Jyambal said in a fast burst, looking directly into my eyes. I nodded in bewildered agreement. He stroked my head gently. The feeling I had when an old man stroked my head was always pleasant.

I then asked whether we still had a long way to travel. He counted the days of our journey and said, "Probably we will arrive tomorrow. It usually takes about twenty days."

I was overjoyed with this reply.

Our local village lama appeared in my dream that night. He was dressed in a yellow cassock, stood at the tent flap like a guard, waved at me, and then flew away like an eagle.

Mother woke me at dawn, and I realized it was a dream. I told Old Jyambal about my dream after breakfast and he interpreted, "How auspicious! Our lama has been protecting us. Now that we've almost arrived, he has returned home." My old friend piously closed his eyes, thanked our local lama with his whole heart, and said, "How lucky that you dreamed of a lama we all know, otherwise it would not be a good dream." Old Jyambal always had something to teach me in his friendly, good-tempered way.

THE SACRED CITY

"Renchin, look! How nice!" Dundrub said. All the pilgrims looked at where Dundrub was pointing. Yes! The holy city of Lhasa was just ahead. When the pilgrims saw the spectacular Potala Palace, they took off their hats and began throwing wind horses in the air. Brother and I were given a bunch of wind horses to throw, my first time to throw them to the invisible mountain deities. We tossed them, yelling, "Victory

to the gods! Oh! *Ku!*¹² Victory to the Three Jewels!" We only knew to say this, which Father often said at dawn when offering tea to our family deities.

Lhasa was unlike the vast, serene grassland of my home. Tall buildings rather than tents loomed up throughout the city. It was noisy and busy from dawn to dusk. Crowds made it resemble a beehive. Peddlers carried their goods on their shoulders, calling to potential buyers in high voices. Cars, bikers, and pedestrians filled the streets, engaged in their own affairs. Beggars rested on the pavement, waiting for pilgrims to give alms, and solitary wanderers were also in plentiful supply.

Brother, Dundrub, and I were amazed to see all this. We had tents at home, but people lived in buildings here. We rode horses and yaks, but people drove cars and rode bicycles here. We looked around in open-mouthed curiosity at this utterly different world.

We camped near the raging Jidchu River. As usual, when we were gathering fuel we couldn't stop talking to each other about this wonderful city. "Finally, we reached Lhasa. It was a long distance," Brother said.

"Yeah, Lhasa is very far from our home. People say that the longer the pilgrimage, the holier the pilgrimage," Dundrub said. Whether what he said was true, I didn't know. For many days, we had endured rain, heat, wind, and storms. This pilgrimage, I thought, was definitely holy because of the distance and hardship.

With very little fuel collected, I found we were resting by the raging river talking, getting deeper into conversation. Our main topic was about Lhasa and our pilgrimage. As the wind blew pleasantly against our faces and birds occasionally chirped near us, Dundrub offered a tale about a ewe:

¹² *Ku* is the sound of yelling loudly from a long distance.

Story of a Ewe

Once a ewe longed to go to Lhasa so desperately that she even dreamed of Lhasa as she slept. Then one spring day, she decided to go by herself on foot. She bade farewell to her lambs and set off, taking nothing with her but a desire to safely reach Lhasa. She went on for days, enduring cold, hunger, and danger. One day she reached a forest, rested, and admired the beautiful, newly budding flowers. A gentle spring breeze refreshed her and made her forget her tiredness after days of journeying. After resting for some time, she happily stood and stretched.

She heard something behind her but ignored it.

"Hey! What are you doing Mother Ewe?" she heard. She thought her wish for a companion had come true, but when she turned she found a big hungry wolf crouched near her. She was so shocked and frightened that she almost fainted.

"How lucky to meet you, I have looked for food for three whole days," said the wolf, gulping saliva. Mother Ewe did not know how to reply; she was so shocked that she trembled like an autumn leaf.

"Well, do you have anything to say before I devour you?" asked the wolf.

"Yes! Yes! Brother Wolf, can you eat me when I return from Lhasa? I promise I will come here when I return! You have my word," pleaded Mother Ewe.

"Impossible! You are deceiving me," said the wolf, stepping closer to the ewe, chomping his sharp fangs.

"Wait! Wait! Brother Wolf! I want to fulfill my dream of going to Lhasa once in my lifetime. I hope you believe that. I will let you eat me when I return," Mother Ewe begged again.

Finally they agreed that Mother Ewe would let the wolf eat her when she returned. Mother Ewe eventually reached Lhasa, visited the temples there, and prostrated to as many images as she wished to. Thinking that she must

keep her word, she prayed for an easy death. Half a year later she was on her way to give herself to the wolf, feeling afraid and sad when she thought about her lambs.

“Mother Ewe, why are you so upset?” a rabbit asked jumping out from a bush.

Mother Ewe told the rabbit all about her encounter with the wolf. Tears streamed from her eyes when she talked about her lambs at home. The rabbit listened carefully and sympathetically.

“Mother Ewe, don’t worry, I’ll help you,” said the rabbit cheerfully and suggested a plan. Mother Ewe was so appreciative that she thanked the rabbit as tears coursed down her cheeks and plopped on the ground.

Mother Ewe went on to the place where she had met the wolf. She quivered as she approached the wolf, who was patiently waiting.

“So you finally arrived,” said the hungry wolf.

“Yes, Brother Wolf, I kept my promise,” Mother Ewe said. “I want to tell you about my journey and visit to Lhasa.”

“OK. I can eat you after your story,” answered the wolf.

Mother Ewe then began to describe her journey and visit to Lhasa.

“What is that beside you?” a voice in the distance boomed. Both the wolf and Mother Ewe looked in the direction of the sound. A hunter was approaching.

“Please tell the hunter I am a tree stump,” pleaded the wolf.

Mother Ewe then said, “Don’t move until I return. Close your eyes and stay here, otherwise the hunter will kill you. I’ll go talk to him.”

“OK. I’ll do as you say,” said the wolf.

Mother Ewe quickly left, frequently looking back at the rabbit who, disguised as a hunter, had saved her life.

Dundrub took a long breath and said, "That's the end of the story. The journey to Lhasa is long and dangerous for anyone who undertakes it."

Brother and I listened in admiration. Dondrub was a talented storyteller. I felt lucky to have such a friend. He seemed to have many more stories to tell, but Father called our names from the camp. We left immediately with our fuel. That time, instead of praising us we were all scolded, but I felt lucky that we had not met such dangers as Mother Ewe had faced.

A refreshing cool breeze blew the following day as the sun inched above the mountains in the East. Guided by the driver, we reached the front of the Potala Palace, the heaven of our daily talk. I felt something creeping inside me, a feeling I had never experienced before. Later when we discussed this, Old Jyambal concluded that people have different feelings when they see the Potala the first time.

Facing the Potala, detached from the noises and bustling crowd, pious people were prostrating with unshakeable faith. Father and our other companions prostrated and I followed. I did not know how to show my faith or trust in the unseen gods; instead I thought that doing this would dirty our clothes. While I was prostrating, I remembered that Father had promised to buy me a pair of shoes and a pair of pants. After prostrating three times, we headed inside the Potala Palace to prostrate to the images and see the wonders there.

A Kālachakra¹³ was painted



¹³ Kālacakra is a Sanskrit term used in Tantric Buddhism that

on the first temple door; I had seen one before on a door of our local monastery. We smelled the butter lamps, which were the sole source of lighting when we entered. A gigantic golden image stood in the temple center radiating peace in the lamplight. Money was piled on rice-filled silver and gold plates before the image (I had earlier been told not to take such money). We prostrated three times and then prostrated to the sacred images one by one. Pillars were covered in colorful silk decorated with the Eight Auspicious Symbols.¹⁴ Various *thangka* 'religious paintings' hung on the walls, depicting hair-raising, frightening gods in armor who were holding spears and daggers. Some pictures showed naked deities of flaming fire and freezing ice.

When I asked Old Jyambal about an angry dragon and a huge hawk on a wall of the Potala Palace, he explained the connections our world had with the hell realm. I wondered if I would suffer in the hell realms because of killing frogs and mischievous sparrows. I recalled the unspeakable consequences of hunting and fishing I had heard from elders.

The temples were pleasant because of the ubiquitous odor of incense. The guards were friendly, but the stern-looking deities depicted in the *thangka* intimidated me. From the beginning to the end of our visit, I held Father's forefinger. When I let go, I found perspiration had wetted my fingers. I, a normally boisterous child, was thoroughly intimidated by the experience and kept quiet in the temples.

literally means 'wheel of time' 'time-wheel' or 'time-cycles'. (The two images are modified versions from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalachakra>, 2 May 2011.)

¹⁴ These symbols are a conch shell, a lotus, a wheel, a parasol, an endless knot, a pair of golden fish, a banner proclaiming victory, and a treasure vase.

PILGRIMAGE TO TSO JYAB

My family members were sitting crossed-legged around the hearth several years later back in Hongyuan. Under the light of the shimmering night fire Father said, "Darkho and I agreed that we will escort you to Mount Porhu on horseback." The fire warmed us but made scary shadows behind each of us.

Mother cleared her throat and said, "Fine, it's not Lhasa we are visiting." She spoke from the *majee*.¹⁵ Sitting in age order and sipping tea sporadically from dragon-decorated bowls, my sisters listened to the conversation about a pilgrimage Mother and I would make.

"How long does it take to get there?" Brother Balden Tsering asked.

"More than six days. Tso Jyab Monastery is in the south part of Barkam," Father replied.

Since I had been chosen to go with Mother, I sat in my comfortable seat and wondered, "What will Tso Jyab Monastery be like? Will Brother Tenzen Tsering say it is unfair that he isn't going?"

"Yeah, heavy man, go get my wallet. It's under our pillow," Father said, lifting me up.

As I searched for the wallet under the folded Tibetan robe that served as a pillow, I found nothing but the dry grass used to prevent dampness from the winter ground. It was dark and cold.

¹⁵ The right side of a tent where women usually sit.

"Father, I can't find it," I yelled.

"It's under the pillow," Father replied.

According to his instructions, I lifted the grass and probed. "Someone could cut off my nose in this darkness," I thought. I touched something, held it, and took it to Father. When I came into the light of the burning fire I found that it was a tightly folded jacket. "Oh, this is a jacket," I sighed.

Father said that was the right thing. I watched carefully as he unfolded the tightly wrapped money. Everybody stared at the special process of unwrapping the money with admiring looks, and partly opened mouths. He held the money in his left hand, spat on his right thumb and forefinger, and began counting. Although he had been an excellent tailor, he was not a good accountant.

"We have 700 RMB. Please be rational about how much you will take," Father said at last.

"Balden, how much is your tuition this year?" Mother asked turning to Brother Balden Tsering.

"Five hundred. People say the tuition will increase next year," Brother said quietly.

"Son, of course it will increase, you will graduate next year," Father said.

There was silence as everybody thought.

"We will take 300, just in case," Mother said.

I thought it was a small amount of money, so I interrupted, "Take more, Mother. You are responsible for my stomach." Everybody burst into laughter but then quieted. I did not understand that money was a real problem.

"You can't compare us with Tseko. We are not on the same level financially and socially. Big Earlobes, did you hear me?" Father asked.

"Yes, I heard you, Father," I answered.

"OK. Obey your mother on the way," Father said.

Besides the clothes we were wearing, we took only two blankets, a *tsamba*-bag full of barley flour, cheese, and butter, and two pairs of cloth shoes: simple preparations.

Traditionally, pilgrims should lead a simple life and be determined to fulfill their wishes. Everybody dreamed of going to Lhasa once in their lifetime. Seeing Teggye Chinbo, the holy image in Tso Jyab Monastery, was a second goal.

WOLVES

"Dear son, it's time for us to get ready. Our companions are probably now on the way here," Mother said, standing by our wooden platform that smelled of yak dung and fresh milk. Her robe was faded and her apron was covered with dried milk. There was frost on the collar and the lower hem of her robe was dusted with snow. I realized that it had snowed last night. I dozed in bed for a while.

"Mother, how big is the snow?" I asked, sitting up in bed, rubbing my eyes.

"Not so big. Get up," Mother responded from the hearth. As I put on my shoes, coldness crept through my ankles to my spine. The idea of returning to bed occurred to me but I decided my big day must not be squandered. Despite the weather and cold, I got up, washed, and put butter on my face. When it was time for breakfast, I felt full somehow and was eager to begin the pilgrimage. Meanwhile, Brother was already eating by the hearth.

"Son, don't be too eager to leave. We have a long way to go today," Mother said, munching a mouthful of *tsamba*.

Her oily face had an amiable smile and a kind look that encouraged me to eat breakfast. While enjoying my meal, Father came in, stomped his snow-covered shoes on the wooden threshold, and removed his wool hat.

"The horses are ready. I'll eat breakfast now," he said and rested next to Brother Tenzen Tsering who was drinking milk tea.

"They will be here soon," Father said.

"Who is going with us, Father?" I said sitting by

Mother.

"If I tell you, you will be excited to death," Father said. As I was about to dig out who was really going with us, dogs barked loudly outside. Father immediately turned to me and said, "Are you full? It's time to leave. They're here."

"Yes," I said, nodding my head. Brother followed Father out, leaving Mother and me behind.

After we finished changing clothes, Mother and I went out to join our companions. Four riders were waiting on their horses at our gate. One was Tseko, Mother's acquaintance. Her hair was as white as the snow on the ground. Her buttered face revealed a toothy smile. An old woman in a black-fabric robe immediately initiated conversation. "So you chose Renchin to be your companion? Is he a good walker?" she asked.

"I don't know. We'll see," Mother said, mounting Garto, a horse my Father got during the 1980s when county leaders distributed property according to the number of people in a home.

It was early. The sun was up on the eastern mountains but covered by a thick cloud. Many people were gathered at our gate as though a meeting was taking place. I stared at a monk, thinking his eyes above his scarf looked familiar.

"Father, help me mount," I said. The horse was too big for a six-year-old boy.

"See! Your Brother Tenzen is already a man, he doesn't need my help," Father pointed to Brother while helping. "Big Earlobes, obey your Mother, OK?" Father said.

"His ears will be cut off if he does not," Tseko said.

I felt my anger about to erupt. I wanted to shout that it was none of her business, but I kept quiet. Our sisters came to say goodbye once we were mounted.

Our winter camp was like a painting – a tree-circled yak enclosure and a house with a big window and door at the front. The smoke from the chimney and the little figures at

the gate made me think that home was a safe, snug place for a child, an image that dulled as the distance between us grew.

With Darkho leading the way, we flicked the reins and smacked the horses' rumps occasionally with whips. Mother and Tseko were talking nonstop. I was bewitched by the spacious summer camp. I had never seen our summer camp covered with snow before. The sun shone as wind blew on our faces. The reflection of the sun off the snow nearly blinded us. I looked at the winter scene, my eyes half-closed because of the glare. Bare trees stood lifelessly by the frozen river banks. I saw animal footprints in the snow. The lonely summer camp was utterly quiet except for the clatter of horse hooves and Mother's and her friend's voices. Sensing the quietness, I thought it would be hard to spend an entire life in such a place.

Our winter and autumn camps were in the mountains, amid trees, unlike the big spacious summer camp between them. We were almost at the border of the summer camp, and I was becoming annoyed by the long journey. Mother was right about the distance. I looked at the little monk and my other companions. They seemed to be almost sleeping.

"Where is Mount Porhu, Brother?" I asked. It seemed unreachable. We had been on horseback for more than five hours.

"Just ahead. It's that mountain. It's not far," Brother Tenzen said pointing into the distance.

Suddenly our horses reared. I was nearly thrown off. The horses snorted and stomped. Darkho, the lead man, pulled his reins and stopped.

"Look! Wolves!" the little monk yelled behind me. We looked where he was pointing. Yes, a pack of wolves had surrounded some horses.

"There are four wolves! Four!" Brother said in astonishment.

"Five horses," Tseko said sympathetically.

"There is also a colt. The wolves are going to kill

them all," I said. Squatting on their hind legs, the wolves were in a square around the horses. It seemed there was no escape. Wolves have a strategy when they attack.

The colt seemed safe under a mare's neck. The horses moved attentively and alertly. The bigger horses were around the colt snorting and stomping at the wolves. It was obvious that they were protecting their only colt.

"No!" Darkho blurted out after observing the horses and wolves for a few moments, "No, the wolves will not attack them."

"Why? It's clear the wolves are about to attack," our little monk companion said.

Now the vigilant horses faced the wolves and stomped their feet to show their anger and hatred, trying to frighten them. They were not far from us. Mother and Tseko felt compassion for the innocent colt and the other horses.

The little monk screamed to frighten the wolves away. Turning their heads slowly toward us, the wolves did not flee. They remained sitting on their hind legs at each corner, as if waiting for a chance to attack the horses.

"They are not attacking," Mother said with relief.

"No, not while the horses protect themselves like this," said Darkho.

Our horses were still very vigilant, snorting and restlessly moving back and forth. I was uneasy on my horse.

The wolves dared not attack the horses but were bold enough not to be frightened off by our shouts. We continued our journey. The little monk and I kept looking back at the wolves. Time passed quickly. Before I realized it, we were at the foot of Mount Porhu, where a serpentine road led to the summit. Brother announced that it was our destination, and we would now part.

The mountain was so steep that beads of pearl-like sweat rolled from our horses' rumps and necks as they panted unevenly up the mountains. Scarves of snow blew in the wind. Unlike the foot of the mountain, it was chilly and

windy in accordance with the saying, "You can taste all seasons on a high mountain."

"Now we are here," Darkho said. He pulled the reins, put his left foot in the stirrup, and dismounted.

"You've done well, boys. Now it is our job to walk," Tseko said to Brother and to her son, Darkho, who helped Brother bundle our things so we could carry them on our backs.

"Gawi Lodro, listen to your mother. Don't make trouble. Do you hear me," said Darkho, turning toward the monk.

"And you too, Renchin," Darkho said, looking very serious. I nodded. I then realized that the monk was my best friend from when we were quite small. We had not met for a long time since we had different summer and winter camps.

Darkho and Brother then left, taking our horses with them. Our pilgrimage on foot began.

ON THE WAY

Enduring the scorching sun, we walked until our legs no longer could carry us through the magnificent landscape. Steep rocky mountains guarded either side of our narrow path. A babbling creek accompanied us. Poplars, junipers, and pine trees thrived in forests on the rocky slopes. Our path narrowly etched its way up the stony mountain. Pacing forward, accompanied by the sound of the creek, we never ceased walking. I quickly became accustomed to the noise of the creek and later missed it.

We walked for four days. Gawi Lodro complained periodically about the pain in his feet. Moaning and grunting, he kept saying that we should rest or have a meal. I complained to Tseko, because every time we stopped, she took out our extra shoes and clothes to be sunned and they took a long time to be repacked. I was always impatient to

set off.

"Mother, let's stop and rest or eat," Gawi Lodro said.

His mother said, "Look at Renchin. He's your age, but he never complains. Aren't you ashamed of complaining?" But it was useless. Dragging his feet heavily on the dusty road, he almost cried.

"He's really tired and it's almost rest time. The sun is about to set," Mother said, making an excuse for Gawi Lodro, putting her bundle down. The sun shone on the trees, stones, water, and everything. It was marvelous. The odor of the trees wafted about. I had rarely experienced such lovely nature.

"It's still very early, Degkardron. We can go further," insisted Tseko. Although she was bandy-legged and walked with a cane, she was a tough, determined woman.

"Nevermind, let's stop for today. The boys are exhausted," Mother said. I approved because I was a bit tired. Seeing Tseko's disheveled hair and oily face, I thought she needed to rest as well.

"Amilolo,¹⁶ you are such a good child, it is my spoiled monk who can't walk. Useless, really useless," Tseko scolded. She was a woman with a peppery tongue, but generally, she was kind and easy-going.

"Don't scold him, Tseko. You know what pain is like," Mother said.

The scenery at sunset was beautiful. Comforting sunrays flickered through the treetops like golden-hued arrows. Flocks of geese in flight amid wisps of clouds created a spectacular scene. We put our things by the road on a little patch of grass and made a hearth of three big stones. Mother and her friend kindled a fire after we collected wood. While we were fetching water in Tseko's teakettle, Gawi Lodro smiled and said, "Don't your feet hurt?"

I said, "I was just forcing myself to continue to

¹⁶ A term of endearment.

walk," which made him feel better. His face glowed. Once we stopped, he acted as if he was perfectly fine. He helped me get water and collect wood. It seemed his pains had vanished.

"Renchin, come, let's wash our faces," Gawi Lodro said, removing his cassock.

"Is the water as cold here as our water?" I asked. At home, the water was transparent and too cold to wash our faces in.

"No, it's warmer," he said. Holding water in our palms, we washed by the riverbank. The water was very clear, warm, and smelled of fish.

Night gradually embraced the earth. Our faces were dimly illuminated by the fire. Mother and Tseko's faces seemed red. We sat around the fire cross-legged and relaxed. We were worn out and had nothing much to talk about for a while. "Boys, since we will reach our destination soon, eat as much as possible," Tseko said.

This refreshed me and made me ask when we would arrive. We hadn't brought much food because of its weight.

"I'm not sure. Maybe tomorrow afternoon, maybe the day after tomorrow," Tseko said. People her age had visited Teggye Chinbo two or more times, testimony to their intense faith.

"If there is a car on the road tomorrow, I'm going to ask the driver to take me," Gawi Lodro said, confirming what a bad walker he was.

"We will walk," Tseko said.

"Renchin will go with me. You two can walk," Gawi Lodro said merrily.

"Sure, riding is better than walking," I said.

"Oh, boys, our pilgrimage means nothing if we ride," Tseko said. Everyone said one should not go by car, otherwise pilgrimage was meaningless.

"Don't quarrel with them, Tseko. They are just dreaming," Mother said.

"Let's see who wins," Gawi Lodro said. We were very confident that we would win the following day.

We had two blankets and our robes for the night, but it was warm and I didn't feel cold. Side by side, the four of us slept under a big tree. I could see the bright stars through the branches, scattered in the sky just like sheep on our summer pasture. The breeze was refreshingly pleasant. I asked Tseko to ask us some riddles, which she agreed to, but she took a little time to think of one.

"Listen carefully: What bird rests on three mountains and has a stomach covered with coral?" she asked.

My friend said it was the intestines of an animal, and I said it was a wild goat on rocks. We were both wrong.

She gave a hint. "In one year, we eat it more than twice."

We tried but failed. "If you don't know, chant *mani* three times," Tseko said. It was a custom that if you didn't know the answer, you chanted *mani* to beg for the answer. Gawi Lodro and I chanted as quickly as we could since we were dying to hear the answer.

"It is cooking wild yams in a pot on a stove," Tseko said laughing audibly.

Later Mother asked us this funny riddle: "What are the hundreds of pails at the camp left behind by Uncle Tsang?"

Again Gawi Lodro and I chanted *mani* three times for the answer, which was the trace of tent pegs pulled out when Uncle Tsang moved to another camp.

That night, I was the last to sleep because my companions' snores kept me awake.

We got up the next morning when the sky was still full of bright stars. The dusty road was dimly lit before us and stretched into the darkness. We could not see each other clearly as we walked single file under the starlit sky. Gawi Lodro walked fast. He was a good walker at the beginning of each day. Mother and Tseko chanted the Six Sacred Syllables

loudly. My friend and I were quiet. I heard the sound of walking sticks striking the ground. Sometimes I felt something was following us, and dared not look back. The trees and rocks beside our road cast hair-raising shadows.

It slowly grew brighter as we quietly walked along what seemed an endless road. As we marched, a truck came from behind, swirling a dusty tail. We stood by the road and yelled at the driver to stop. Gawi Lodro waved vigorously and yelled after the truck, "*Sifu dage che!*"¹⁷ It worked. The driver stuck his head out the window and signaled for us to get in. Because of the number of pilgrims to Teggye Chinbo, every driver knows where the walkers on the road are headed. If the driver is kind enough, he offers a ride.

Once the kind-hearted driver stopped, we looked at our puzzled mothers. As if they had made a decision in their dreams, they blurted out for us to get in the truck. Thus, we won the contest.

In less than two hours, we were at the foot of a mountain, and our destination, Teggye Chinbo, was at the top.

A SURPRISING MONK

We met a group of pilgrims that afternoon – a monk, an old man, and a young woman. The monk was in his forties and very strong. His long hair astounded me. It was longer than a woman's and wrapped around his head. He wore gem-studded rings on his fingers and prayer beads around his right wrist. At our local monastery, monks' heads were shaved and they never wore rings as they considered them to typify laymen. My friend was flabbergasted and gawked at the monk constantly. Our mothers felt uneasy when we looked at him with wide-open mouths and nudged us with

¹⁷ Chinese for "Driver, give a ride."

their elbows as a hint to stop. The monk's ugly facial features frightened us.

The road to the mountain top was steep and winding. We talked as we walked to the monastery. Piles of walking sticks by the road suggested the number of pilgrims coming to visit Teggye Chinbo. The road cut deeply into the earth amid poplar trees scattered over the steep mountains.

The woman was dressed in a clean, silk robe. Her hair was ornamented with small bits of coral. From the very beginning, she was nice and chatted with our mothers about the weather, the distance, and other things. We have a saying, "Upon encountering Tibetans, they talk of the weather; upon encountering Chinese, they talk of what they have eaten."

"There is a spring," the woman said, seeing a spring among some bushes to which innumerable amulets were tied, signaling it was likely a sacred spring. Water flowed from the crevices of the rock. We drank at the spring, washed our faces, and splattered water on our heads. We believe holy water keeps us smart and repels illness.

"I hope it won't rain. If it does, we will have to stay behind the mountain," said the monk, examining the sky and drying his face with his cassock.

"It probably won't. Look at the clouds," Mother said, beads of water dripping from her chin to the ground. Flimsy clouds moved freely in the sky. I was puzzled as to how Mother knew it would not rain by just looking at the clouds above our heads.

"Perhaps you're right," the monk agreed.

The mountain was so high that we were all perspiring when we finally reached the top. Leaning on our bundles, we rested for a time. It was comfortable to feel the wind. From the top, we could see a big city engaged in a day's work south of the mountain in a long narrow valley. I reckoned that we had come from the north. Our destination was still a bit far away. We enjoyed breathing the fresh air.

"You boys are good walkers," the woman said

smiling and breathing at the same time.

"We walked for five days and then took a ride this morning. I was really tired," Gawi Lodro replied.

"Was it your idea to take a ride?" the woman said with an amiable smile. Oh, gracious Buddha! How did she know? My friend smiled but did not answer. She said good children listened to their mothers and were not disobedient. I was somehow embarrassed.

Unlike what I had imagined, Teggye Chinbo was only three buildings. As we entered the double metal doors painted with a pair of facing dragons, a monk caretaker came to greet us and asked where we were from. He was dressed like my friend, in a sleeveless jacket under his red cassock, with nothing covering his arms. He was bald, and wore no finger rings.

He guided us around after a short conversation. A big building was opposite the door and two smaller buildings faced each other. There was also a large adobe platform for offering incense to the *yedam* deities and the Three Jewels. The yard was made more pleasant by the scent of incense, reminding me of my local village's monastery, which I visited annually. In the middle of the temple was an image of Teggye Chinbo, a spectacular, golden-hued image sitting cross-legged. A glass box in front of the image was stuffed with paper money and coins. On the temple walls were painted scrolls featuring wrathful deities. The image and scrolls were illuminated by flickering butter lamps on an altar in the right corner. We prostrated with all our hearts before the image of Teggye Chinbo, and the *thangka* in the temple.

One of the temples had a huge prayer wheel painted with the Eight Auspicious Symbols. A bell hanging from the ceiling rang once every rotation and the woman, my friend, and I turned the prayer wheel with all our strength to ring the bell as many times as we could. "What fun to meet such an easygoing, kind woman," I thought.

"Boys, let's go," said the monk with long hair, while we were still turning the prayer wheel.

"OK, coming!" the woman yelled. Then we stopped and panted. "Let's go, you mischievous boys," she said.

Mother and the others waited for us at the gate. The long-haired man said, "It seems you guys are not doing any good, just having fun." I immediately thought we had done nothing wrong and that he did not have the right to scold us, since he was just a stranger.

"The sun is ebbing; let's go," Mother said, picking up the bundle she had left at the gate. She sounded in a hurry. The elders moved quickly. Everybody was sensitive about the time except for my friend and I. I was sorry I didn't have more time to enjoy myself in the temple with Gawi Lodro and the woman who was so cheerful.

In our home place, the grassland extended its immeasurable width in all directions and the mountains lacked a sense of majestic height. Here, near the temple, the mountains reared their peaks triumphantly, seemingly poised to penetrate the sky. The rivers seemed just under my feet when I looked down. Life was closely connected to every step I took, for a single misstep would have rolled me into a bottomless ravine.

Mother and Tseko were unhappy with the winding road. Using their walking sticks and talking endlessly, they walked slowly and carefully. I was impatient with their slowness, and my friend was also annoyed.

"Can you walk faster? I'm bored waiting for you two at every turn in the road," I said. We walked ahead and waited for them at every point.

"Oh, boys, you know we are getting old. Our legs can no longer carry us like when we were young. Anyway, you go first if you want," Tseko said. We were actually afraid of going ahead, since there were many stories about demons eager to grasp and eat boys our age. Gawi Lodro happened to be cowardly also, for it was he who said we ought to walk

with them even after hearing what Tseko said.

All seven of us stayed the night by a bush-covered riverbank near a cliff at the foot of the mountain. During breakfast the following morning, Gawi Lodro got up and said that he needed to relieve himself.

The woman immediately grunted, "Oh no, don't talk about that, let me eat first."

Gawi Lodro and I laughed and went into the bushes to relieve ourselves. Once we were out of sight, he smiled and said quietly, "I don't need to do anything. Did you see something unusual?" with a mysterious look on his face.

"When? Where?" I asked, trying to think of anything unusual that had happened.

Gawi Lodro came close to me and whispered, "This morning, here, among us. The monk had three rings on his fingers, right?" he said impatiently.

"So what?" I said, getting annoyed.

"Now the three finger rings are on the woman's fingers," he said.

"Wow! Then, then, is he a monk?" I asked in amazement.

"Yes, he is wearing a cassock like me," my friend answered.

"Let's go have a closer look," I said, grabbing his wrist.

My friend was right. The beautiful gem-studded rings were on the woman's fingers. She calmly sat cross-legged by the open fire, eating her *tsamba*. Monks in our home place who had close contact with women were surely scolded. Seeing the differences between that monk and himself, Gawi Lodro was speechless.

"He is probably not a monk. We have many rules in our monastery and his every action is against the laws," my friend later said. For some time, his eyes never left the woman and the monk.

When we were about to leave, the monk said he had

lost his prayer beads. We all searched but we did not even see the shadow of those prayer beads. Like wandering dogs, we went hither and thither, looking for them. It was the woman who fished them out from her robe pouch finally, laughed merrily, and said, "They're here in my pouch."

"I really thought I had lost them," the monk said, putting the string of beads back on his wrist.

Their tenderness to one another and flirtatious looks were obvious. "They are a couple, I guess," I whispered in Gawi Lodro's ear.

"I was thinking they probably eloped," murmured my friend, his mouth close to my ear.

"Can monks have wives?" I asked.

My friend shrugged, indicating he didn't know. What happened that morning was a topic we often surreptitiously discussed. From time to time, our mothers showed us their frowning faces, as meaningful as deep oceans. It was clear they wanted us to stop murmuring. Elders are always sensitive about hurting others' feelings.

Later, I came to understand that the monk I had met was a lay tantric specialist. They have wives, drink, and smoke like laymen. They have great power and if we are possessed by evil spirits, only they can cure us and drive the evil spirits away. They also cast spells on their enemies.

KILLING SPARROWS

Winter was cold and long. Snow fell constantly and then, after some days, it melted. When I woke up one morning, the birds were not singing as usual. Bitter cold was in the air, invisibly touching my bones. I lay still tucked in a warm sheepskin robe, enjoying its warmth. The pillow was soft and the pad was comfortable. When I heard yaks walking on the snow outside I excitedly jumped up and ran naked to Brother, who was still dreaming with a peaceful look on his face. I jumped on him, poked his nose, and shrilled, "Brother, get up! It snowed last night!" It was simple for us – snow meant we could kill sparrows. I knew he would agree to hunt with me.

It was frigid outside but beautiful. Mountain ranges and infinite grassland were covered in whiteness stretching into eternity. The serpentine roads and rivers leading to unknown places were clutched in whiteness. Strips of white clouds floated in the vast sky above, as if searching for morning birds. Snow was heaped on the windowsills, on the roof, and on the backs of yaks in the yak enclosure. Snow had conquered our world in just one night,

"Do you have your weapon?" Brother asked when we reached the yak enclosure door. Our shoes sank into the thick soft snow. Immediately we felt the cold in the bones of our ankles. My weapons were stones that were bigger than Brother's because his catapult required small stones. I had to throw big stones to kill the not-so-agile sparrows.

"Do you have stones in your pockets?" I asked.

"Yeah, let's go," Brother said and spiritedly gestured, suggesting we enter the yak enclosure, which had two doors. The male yaks had already been let out from the rear door of the yak enclosure. Only a few calves were separated from their mothers, which Mother and one of my sisters were milking, pails tied to their waists. Morning birds were on the dry spaces, hopping back and forth to find their morning meal. As we approached the little creatures, I pointed to a bold, gray sparrow. We both aimed at it, but failed to kill it. Brother blamed me for stretching my arm too high in the air. I felt angry. How could I throw stones without lifting my hand? Anyway, we continued trying.

It was usually cold after a snow, yet I did not feel cold when I was focused on hunting. "Let me milk first, boys," Mother said when we entered the yak enclosure. Carelessly, I threw a stone at a sparrow that seemed unaware of my existence. Accidentally, the stone rolled in front of the yak Mother was milking. The yak was frightened and moved about. Fortunately, the brimming bucket of milk did not splash. Mother placed the bucket of milk to one side and made a snowball which she tossed at us, shouting, "Get out of here before I beat you, boys!" I saw her angry face, reddened by the bitter cold of the morning. "If you come back again, let's see what will happen," I heard Mother scold. Like two cowardly foxes, we retreated into our house.

Father sat by the fire, sipping milk tea as usual. With an ingratiating smile he said, "Mother drove you away, didn't she?" He laughed heartily. Without answering Father, we sat by the hearth. Father continually added yak dung to the fire. It was warm. The smell of smoke and yak dung lingered. Spider webs were in every corner of the house. Even if it was the twenty-ninth day for cleaning,¹⁸ we did not remove them

¹⁸ Shortly before the beginning of the lunar New Year, a family cleans their home, discards what is no longer needed, cleans their carpets, and so on. If there is no snow, barley

because we thought that a spider had worked for a long time to spin a web and removing it was like someone destroying our home. My hands and feet got warm and then ached. Even so, hunting sparrows was fun.

"We will attack the sparrows later, OK?" Brother said.

"OK," I answered. I knew the birds were slow, because snow limited their ability to find food, and the bitter cold slowed their tiny legs and feet.

The bright sun shone on the snow, glistening and sparkling. My eyes could hardly see in the glare of the snow and sun. Birds chirped and energetically collected food in our muddy yak enclosure. Brother and I resumed hunting sparrows around noon. Our trousers were soon soaked and our shoes were caked with mud. As we attacked, the birds flew in another direction. We followed, trying to kill one or two. My right arm ached, but I never felt frustrated.

"I'll hit you," Brother said as he raised his special weapon in the air. He ultimately hit a clumsy sparrow with his catapult. He was overjoyed. For me, it was the first time I had seen him kill a sparrow, and the first time to see a dead sparrow with a pair of dull eyes and a head like the tip of my thumb. The grayish feathers layered on the body made it look very warm. Brother and I wanted to keep the skinny legs, because we thought they were a rare toy. The sparrow was still warm. I was both interested and afraid of the dead bird.

"I have a splendid idea. Get a knife, but don't let them know. I'll wait right here," Brother said as we studied the bird's shape and talked about its bright painted-like feathers.

I rushed to our house and found it was as dark as night inside.

"Father, where are you?" I asked.

flour is sprinkled on the ground on New Year morning. Snow on New Year's Day is auspicious.

Before I could hear Father's reply, Mother said to me, "Yeah, that means you are getting it."

I did not know what 'it' was nor could I see anything. "I'm here, by the hearth," Father said.

Slowly, my eyes adjusted and I saw Father to the right of the hearth, where men sit. I approached him, wondering how to get what I needed. I thought there surely was a hint of deceit on my face. Mother was studying me to learn what I was thinking. Stealthily, I looked around. A knife lay attractively on the *tsamba* bag beside Father, who was drinking tea. I grabbed the knife when nobody was watching and quickly rejoined Brother in the yak enclosure.

"Excellent! Now just look," Brother said as he cut the sparrow's legs off, cut it open, and threw the intestines and head to our dog, who sniffed at them, and then returned to his usual place, wagging his curly tail between his legs. It seemed he felt the 'meat' was inedible.

The sky was crystal clear that evening. The wind gently caressed the darkness, creating a peaceful night. In the midst of the quiet, however, Brother was suffering greatly. He said his eyes were about to explode. I only felt a little discomfort but the pain in my eyes got worse in the night. I moaned and cried when Father lit the lamp by our bed. The light struck my eyes like needles. It was like my eyeballs were about to roll out. Unable to bear the pain, I cried loudly. Father put a wet towel on my eyes, burned some sacred juniper powder, wafted the smoke on my eyes, and then went back to sleep. I could not sleep because of the pain. I thought it must be the sparrow's revenge.

I was told to stay in the house all the next day. Brother's eyes were less affected. His eyes looked normal, though he rubbed them constantly.

"Mother, you are ruthless!" I said while we were eating our lunch.

"Big Earlobes, why do you say that?" Mother asked.

"You didn't tell us that our eyes would hurt if we

hunted in the snow," I said with a long face.

"Actually, I did. But as you boys grow up, there are many things to encounter. You need to know much, including pain and pleasure," Mother said. The previous day, Mother had said, "That means you are getting it." I realized she had warned me.

AN AMULET

Dogs barked ferociously and the metal chains they were tied to clanged. Expecting a beggar, Brother and I rushed out, leaving the tent-flap swaying back and forth. Dogs didn't bark without reason. Someone unfamiliar was near. Sure enough, we saw two riders approaching our tent.

The afternoon sun shone brightly, its shimmering rays bouncing and reflecting the river. Yaks and horses grazed quietly along the banks and at the foot of the mountain. It was still early for a summer day. During autumn, daytime vanishes in a breath of time, captured by the saying, "A horse wears out in a single autumn night."

"Father, come out. Two guests are coming," Brother called.

Father and our sisters quickly emerged to welcome the visitors.

Riding a high-spirited horse, two monks in cassocks approached. Seeing I was not wearing a shirt, Father said, "Big Blue, put on your shirt or they'll laugh at you."

Since summer was hot and I usually played with Brother without any clothes on, my skin was tanned, and everybody in my family called me 'Big Blue' and 'Blacky', which meant I was different from Brother, who was as white as ivory and had the name 'Chinese', because we consider Han to be white-skinned, clean, and thin.

The two guests were escorted into our tent. There was a time of silence as we settled around the hearth. I wondered

if they had come for a particular reason. Relatives frequently visited, but I had never met these two monks. What's more, they seemed not well-acquainted with my parents. We treated them with the best we had. Father asked my eldest sister to get two bowls used only for monks. Until then, I had not known that monks do not use bowls used by laymen. It was the same with clothes. Rightso, my eldest sister, served them *tsamba* and milk tea.

After the meal, one guest turned to Father and said, "Shirab, we came because, to make it short, we want your son to be a monk. I mean, when he grows up." I suddenly realized that his hill-like nose above his toothy mouth did not suit his round face. He had removed his woolen, sharp-pointed hat, revealing a bald head.

"We intend to send Tenzen Tsering to school. Renchin is still quite young," Father replied, and gave Mother a questioning look. Mother smiled in return, as if to say she was not included in the matters of monks and men.

"I mean the younger one. We talked before about you sending Tenzen Tsering to school," the man clarified. "Here is an amulet. I hope you will consider this later," he said, fishing out an amulet from his pouch and giving it to Father. I saw that the monk's hand was as white as Brother's, but very plump. I never liked being fat because my eldest brother often joked about my sister, Nymdrin, who was heavier than us.

Brother and I listened carefully as Father said, "I am not sure what will follow if he becomes a monk. Nowadays, more and more monks are..."

Before Father could conclude saying that the monks were running away from our monastery and becoming laymen, the monk, gesturing with his hands, interjected, "I understand. You are right about that. Monks are becoming laymen and now there are only about sixty monks in our local monastery. But you will think about it, won't you?"

I had been to our monastery several times, but the

idea of becoming a monk had never occurred to me. I wondered what it would be like to be a monk, wear a cassock, and spend time with little monks. I enjoyed the free and happy life I was having.

"Now, I'm afraid we must leave. Boy, I will see you in our local monastery," one monk said and tossed me some candy.

Joy filled my heart, but Brother watched me, as if he were jealous of the possibility of my becoming a monk. "Father is intending to send you to school, and I will be a monk," I said to comfort him, and then I shared my candies with him.

"It is very generous of you to share with your Brother, dear son," Mother said. This was sweet and pleasant to hear because she seldom praised us.

My becoming a monk was hotly discussed throughout autumn and winter. Mother was from a family of generations of great Buddhist monks, and wanted me to enter the local monastery. She said, "My uncles were monks and suffered terribly during the Cultural Revolution."¹⁹ Some were killed. Now I have only one uncle left in the world." Tears streamed down her cheeks like dewdrops and sank into the soft ground. It was clearly painful for Mother to recall the deaths of her uncles. I felt sorry for her.

"It is useful to have a monk in our family. We wouldn't need to trouble the monks to chant annual scriptures anymore. They've been helping us since I was young. It is difficult to find monks to chant scriptures sometimes. It would be very beneficial and convenient for our family to have a monk," said Mother.

Father only nodded. Maybe he was considering about how to deal with this matter properly.

Since it seemed I was to be a monk, I began imitating monks. I hung mother's long, wide, red sash over my

¹⁹ 1966-1976.

shoulders like a cassock, held a prayer wheel in my left hand, and stretched out my right hand to touch people's foreheads and to remove their sins and ignorance, as if I were a real lama. Chanting scriptures was difficult because of my lack of education so I murmured the prayers I knew. One time, I mimicked our local lama whose head and eyes were always moving from side to side. My sisters and brother laughed their heads off. My parents also laughed but said I should stop. I knew it was humorous, so I did it many times until it became tiresome. I was good at it, and people who were close to our family called me "the lama." Brother called me "Copy Cat."

Brother Balden Tsering returned from the distant place where he had been studying. Naturally, I was happy to see him because he was rarely at home. He was dressed nicely in a clean, baggy jacket and blue jeans. He smelled nice and was paler than Brother Tenzen Tsering, which kept the dream in my heart alive of going to Han Chinese places.

We sat around the hearth on the night of the second day of my big brother's return. Father said that he wanted to hear Brother Balden Tsering's opinions. Although Father was the head of our family, he treated Big Brother with respect.

"I think we should wait. Let him decide when he grows up," he suggested.

I didn't like that because I had already made up my mind to be a monk. Now it seemed I could only be a monk when I grew up.

"Don't you want to read like I do?" Brother asked in surprise when I showed my agitation.

"Father is intending to send Brother Tenzen Tsering to school. I heard that," I almost cried, "So I'm going to be a monk." I wanted to go to school and study like Brother and join the monks as well. I was caught between the two desires. I stayed near Father with a long face, since I didn't know which to choose.

"Blacky, you take after your uncle – stupid as a cow,"

Big Brother teased. I was so angry that I couldn't keep myself from sobbing. Although it was comforting to receive support from Father, when Brother added that I was acting like a girl, I started to sob louder and refused Father's comfort. I had a good cry that night.

TSEKO

A magpie facing north sang cheerfully in a tree in front of our wood house one morning. She had a white-striped body and jumped from branch to branch, as playfully as a happy child. Although I was in low spirits, I knew at once that a guest would visit that day from the north because a magpie singing in the early morning portended that. There are other portents, too. A 'tea guest' is portended by a tea leaf standing erect in a bowl of tea and a 'fire-guest' is suggested when a rectangular piece of charcoal in the hearth ash is noticed. They both mean a guest will soon visit.

I told Father we would have a guest while we were sitting around the hearth. He said, "Let's wait and see if my boy is right."

"I'm always right, Father," I said proudly.

"You really take after your uncle, always thinking you are omniscient," Father said. "That's why our villagers call him 'All-Knowing'."

Since Brother and Father said bad things about Uncle Ringko, I didn't like to hear that I took after him. To show that I took after Father, I stretched my fist into the burning fire hearth. "See, I take after you, not my uncle," I said enduring the pain.

"Boy, take your hand away, otherwise the fire will burn it to ash," Mother said anxiously from the other side of the hearth.

"OK, OK, you're my son. Of course you take after me.

Stop! Stop!" Father said, preventing me from demonstrating the bravery and endurance that he had passed down to me. Laughing heartily, Father said, "You are a crazy boy, Renchin." I was glad to hear that because crazy meant I was like Father, not like Uncle, who I thought was inferior to Father.

After breakfast, the topic about the coming guest was forgotten and not mentioned again until early afternoon. I was about to go fetch water when Mother stepped in and said, "Renchin, wait a bit. Someone is coming," then she scurried around, straightening up our house. I stopped, since fetching water in front of guests is rude, disrespectful, and bad luck for the newcomer. It is called 'empty bucket' and signals bad luck for the guest.

When our watchdog barked, Mother went out to stop the dog. I stood by the gate. Our guest slowly approached riding a white horse. I saw an aged face and a snowball-like head. I realized it was Tseko.

Mother asked in surprised, "Oh, Tseko! What brings you here?"

Tseko pulled the reins, stopping her horse. "My friend, nothing good drives me here. It is bad luck which forces me to beg," Tseko said.

Mother asked in puzzlement, "What on earth are you talking about?" They both looked pathetic with their weather-beaten, wrinkled faces, disheveled hair, and fragile bodies visibly disintegrating.

"An inauspicious crow shat on my head. Now, according to tradition, I must beg something from nine households. I'm here to beg for a bowl of *tsamba*, Degkardron," Tseko explained.

"How interesting! I've heard of this before," Mother said with a laugh. "Anyway, dismount, and then I'll meet your request," said Mother, holding the reins.

Tseko hesitantly said, "I'm supposed to be home before supper."

"Don't worry, stay for a while. It won't take much time," said Mother.

Persuaded, Tseko dismounted so awkwardly that I wanted to laugh, but I controlled myself. When Tseko regained her vitality, she turned to me and said, "You have grown into a man," looking into my eyes admiringly.

I kept quiet.

"Remember, we went to Teggye Chinbo together?" Tseko asked with an amiable smile.

"Of course I remember," I answered.

"You're a good walker. I'm old, but I still remember that," she said, satisfied with her memory.

"Come inside," said Mother and led Tseko into our home.

Father was right; women are talkative about everything. Mother and her friend fell into deep conversation that seemed endless. It was almost dusk when Tseko left.

"Father, I am always right," I said triumphantly, standing before Father.

"What?" Father asked.

"This morning I said we would have a guest and Tseko came," I said.

"Oh, I remember. Yeah, you were right," he admitted.

I was happy to win someone's trust. Since that victory, I kept an eye out for signs that guests would come.

FROGS

As Brother and I matured, summer creatures became victims. We followed little streams and stayed at ponds where fish and frogs abound. At times, not wanting us to kill fish and frogs, Mother ran yelling after us, in her inconvenient Tibetan robe. Sometimes she held a stick or a yak-hide rope, and her face was red. Seeing such a funny scene, Father would laugh.

Our black tent was pitched on a flat-topped hill that stretched into marshland. This fulfilled Brother's and my wish, for it was convenient for us to hunt summer creatures in the marsh. We spent so much time on the marshland that Father said we smelt of mud and marsh grass. Once Mother learned we went to the marshland, she scolded us and chanted the Six Sacred Syllables to atone for our misdeeds.

One morning, tucked under Father's robe, I silently stayed in bed as the morning sun rose from behind mountains in the east. Some rays of its light beamed on my face through the tent crevices. Brother was sleeping in an S shape, his head bent over his chest and his feet under his buttocks. His snores rattled the tent. The hearth fire, tent poles, cooking utensils, altar, and so on, all seemed to be meditating in the quiet morning. Suddenly, Mother came in without warning with a bucket full of milk. She lifted the tent-flap and everything in the tent now seemed disturbed. Her disheveled hair was covered with a bit of morning frost. Her hands and apron were milky. She placed the bucket on the ground, saw me still in bed, heard Brother snoring, and

said, "One resembles a mouse under the *yado*. Boys, get up quickly. You've got to herd the calves," and then left the tent.

"In ten minutes, Mother!" I yelled in reply. Silence again returned to the tent. Even though it was morning, the sun was already hot. I recalled that Father had once said it was a 'frog day' if the sun was hot and people felt tired without reason. I thought it might be a frog day.

"Hey! Wake up," I said and shook Brother. Unwillingly, he sat up in bed and yawned. Outside I could hear Mother calling our names. "Brother, please get up. Mother is calling us," I said then ran out to Mother and asked, "Mother, were you calling me?"

After she finished milking, Brother and I were responsible for keeping the calves away from their mothers. It was a difficult task. The calves were fast and disobedient when their mothers mooed from a distance. I had desperately tried to stop the calves many times but could not, and shed tears of frustration many times. While I was herding the calves, time seemed very long. I was also told to drive the calves back to the tent and fasten them again at noon.

As I neared the yak enclosure, Mother and my sisters were tying the calves in pairs with ropes to limit their disobedience. Mother inquired if Brother was up.

"He'll be here soon, Mother," I responded.

"Don't let the calves nurse their mothers. Herd them well, otherwise you'll be punished," Mother said.

"You have my word, Mother," I said.

"Fine, let's see if you really are a man of your word," Mother said.

After untying the rebellious calves, I drove them to the marshland, constantly looking back for Brother. I imagined that he had slept again and was now snoring like a dragon. Soon, Mother's shrill voice rang out in the air of our summer camp, and Brother arrived wearing a long face.

After some time, Brother picked up a frog and threw it at me. Irritated and surprised, I said, "That's not funny.

Stop!"

He howled in laughter. It was his habit to laugh when he annoyed others. He tossed more frogs at me. I was so scared that I couldn't move. Brother held up an ugly frog and said that he would put it in my shirt and chased me like a wolf chasing a sheep. I begged for mercy. When he was exhausted, he laughed, holding his belly with both arms, still holding the frog.

"OK. You herd the calves," I said and headed home.

"Come back, I won't do it again, I promise. Please, Father will kill me if you tell," Brother said pathetically. Although we argued and fought, we both needed each other. Neither of us felt good in the absence of the other. Disagreement consolidated our intimacy and friendship.

Forcing a smile, he said, "I have an idea," approached me, and murmured his plan in my ear, as if the calves might overhear and report to our parents. I agreed. Facing the burning sun, Brother stretched out his arms and yelled, "We will take revenge!" As we courageously began our plan, the calves were forgotten and a harsh lesson awaited us.

"Renchin, bring the ax and then dig a hole. I'll get some frogs and toads for you," Brother said. In one breath, I ran back to the yak enclosure where Mother and my sisters used the ax to beat wood pegs into the ground to tie up the livestock. I did not find it in the yak enclosure so I looked for it around the tent. Father used it to stabilize pegs that held the tent. I thought the ax might be somewhere near the tent.

"Look at you, like a stray dog. What are you doing here? Are you herding the calves?" said Mother, coming out from the tent with a lambskin she was softening to make a lamb-skin robe. The distinctive odor that emanated from the lambskin made me dizzy and uncomfortable.

"Of course. We're playing hide-and-seek while herding," I replied. Simultaneously, a fear of Mother knowing the truth crept through my ankles to my spine, and I felt guilty.

"Fine, but I will only see the result," said Mother and returned to her own work. I then had the freedom to look for the ax which was a key element in the drama Brother and I were enacting. I found the ax just behind our tent, took it, and headed back to the marshland.

"This is going to be a spectacular and fabulous adventure," Brother said. He clapped his palms together, producing a sharp sound. His smile was like bright sunshine. He looked energetic. His cloth shoes, trousers, and the lower hem of his Tibetan robe were wet. The frogs he had collected were in his shirt with the collar tied together with a shoelace and the sleeves tied in a tight knot. I could see and sense the frogs and toads struggling for survival, trying to escape suffocation and death.

After eagerly digging a hole the size of a teapot, Brother grabbed each end of the shirt with both hands and poured all the innocent creatures into the hole. There seemed to be as many as grains of sand on a beach. The frogs moved and jostled each other in the hole, their webbed feet pushing at each other helplessly, as they moaned from the pressure of the mass. "How disgusting to see such an ugly scene, I can't bear it," I thought.

Brother told me to cover the hole with dirt, but I refused. I was too afraid.

"You must. We are taking revenge," Brother insisted. "Frogs frightened you before, now you can do whatever you want to them."

In fact it was he who scared me, not the frogs. I shut my eyes and tried, but when I envisioned black and gray frogs moving and about to leap at me, I quit.

"OK. Let me handle this," he said and covered the hole with the earth that I had dug out. "Yeah, easy?" he said, looking triumphant. "But the big thing is still to come."

"What?" I said, thinking our mission was accomplished.

Brother said, "The real thing! Now watch. This is

going to be something different."

I stood as unmoving as a sculpted stone image and watched the show he considered awesome. He grabbed the ax handle with both hands, brandished it in the air, and then brought it down hard on the soil above the frogs.

I screamed in terror.

Again, he raised the ax and said, "This is for you, on behalf of Brother," and whacked the earth again. A victorious look and smile covered his face. Even the way he walked seemed to suggest that he had returned from battle with honor and bravery.

"Please, don't open it," I said. I thought I was brave and courageous but realized that I was not. I admit that, however much I wanted to be like Father, I lacked this aspect. "It won't frighten you, I promise," said Brother.

"Anyway, I'm scared. Well, fine, let's open it. Don't scare me or I'll tell Father," I responded.

Gosh! What a merciless massacre! Many frogs were crushed in that little hole. Blood mingled with dirt. It was the nastiest scene I have ever seen. Some frogs were moving unconsciously. Others were chopped to bits. As I observed this ugliness, I visualized the Hell realm Mother had described: "Many formidable, fearsome deities torture those who accumulate misdeeds. Hunters, liars, unfilial people, and all sorts of evil people suffer in Hell."

I was like a stone statue when I realized Brother was pulling my collar, saying, "Renchin, the calves, the calves..." his face no longer showed a victorious smile. We hurried to our work like a gust of wind.

The disobedient calves had rejoined their mothers, proving we had neglected our work. Mother severely scolded us. If not for Father's persuasion, she would have thrashed us. Holding a rope to punish us, Mother looked fearsome. Neither of us ever told her what we had done in the marshland. It remained a secret. Frightening nightmares came at night. The feet and ears of frogs... bits and pieces of

frogs came in my dreams in retaliation for my cruelty. Many times I woke up drenched in sweat. Since then, thinking about the Hell realm and my nightmares, I have never dared kill little creatures again. Brother, however, did not seem affected and told me more stories about his killing adventures.

One was related to killing fish with a tent-pole. Wood-poles are V-shaped at the top so they can hold tent ropes well. Gesturing and emphasizing, Bother said:

I killed a big fish using a tent pole. I grabbed the tent-pole and aimed at this stupid fish in the water. I was so focused that I forgot what was going on around me. The fish was my only concentration! In a second and a sudden stab in the water, an unimaginable thing happened. I stealthily aimed at the fish, not even breathing. Then I struck it, cutting it into two pieces with the pole. The head continued moving for a moment. It was really thrilling.

He looked pale when he finished this hair-raising tale. I visualized a fish head wiggling in the water and fear crept into my body. I was so scared that my scalp became numb. Spontaneously, the ugly scene of how we killed the frogs returned to my mind, torturing me.

I joined Brother and did many awful things in summer. In winter, we were like turtles, retracting our mischievous hands and feet into our shells, but not completely.

BROTHER ATTENDS SCHOOL

Time elapsed without register. Brother and I shared joy and sorrow as brothers and playmates. Our happy times were limited, however, and Brother left me alone on the grassland to attend our village school, where he then spent most of his time. My days crawled by. I spent days and nights thinking about Brother, my hero. I never ceased loving him.

The day Brother left for school showed he was a man of steel. He shed not even one tear. He watched me crying while my sisters comforted me. It was a foggy fall morning when Father and Brother finally left camp. I cried desperately as they rode away. One thing that felt good was Brother constantly looking back. Their horses were fast, and I quickly lost sight of them. Fate was inevitable. Our happy days had vanished. I was alone.

Soon, yak herders spread the news of fruit in the forest and groups of people went there to enjoy autumn's riches. Out of concern for my safety, my parents forbade me from going to the forest with my sisters. This increased my sense of sorrow, of missing Brother. Once, however, Elder Sister Rigtsu surreptitiously took me to the forest while my parents were away. Without a saddle, she mounted a hornless yak and put me in front of her. The movement of the yak caused great pain to my buttocks but it vanished when she sang herding songs. There were other herders singing in the distance as well. The autumn landscape in the early afternoon was wonderful. Lustrous sunshine washed the

entire world in gold. The transparent sky and clattering rivers were like mirrors. Riding our yak unevenly, we nearly fell off several times, but we soon reached our destination. Other herders were already there, eating the forest fruits. The discomfort in my buttocks was completely forgotten when I saw the mouthwatering fruits.

I ate crazily until my little tummy was so full that I found it hard to walk. I burped constantly in satisfaction. Sister Rigtsa and some other herders drew pictures on my face with juice squeezed from the fruit, making me look like a ghost. Drawing pictures on the face means a lot to children, for it shows that you have been to the forest, and your peers admire you. It is a pleasant memory for those who experience it.

"Sister, Mother will scold us," I said, untying the yak. It was getting late, and all the herders were setting off to drive their yaks home.

Without answering, she showed me a plastic bag full of fruits. An amiable smile covered her face that I did not quite understand.

As I expected, Mother began scolding us severely, especially Sister for taking me with her. But Sister had a way of coping. She took the bag of fruit and gave it to family members who had not been to the forest. Mother, too, enjoyed the fruits Sister had brought. Her smiles were barely hidden behind her anger and scolding.

"Tenzen used to go to the forest with his sisters, but now he cannot eat delicious autumn fruits anymore," Father said with a little sigh, eating some fruits.

"Yeah, if it were not for the 2,000RMB fine that we would have to pay for not sending a child to school, I wouldn't have him go to a place where he can't even see his family. What's more, Renchin's lonely here all the time," Mother said. She was always critical of schools.

"Anyway, education is important. We must follow the rules," Father concluded.

Wherever I went, my environment was quiet. Brother had been everything. I had fought with him, quarreled with him, played with him, and grew up with him. His absence made life lonely and dull. Although my sisters were very nice to me, they were no substitute for Brother.

CHINA AND JAPAN

A great change took place two years after Brother left for school, which altered my life. Father finally decided to send me to school, which meant I was unable to realize my dream of being a monk in our local monastery. I thought about the monk who had asked me to join the monastery and about Brother who was in school. To choose between being a monk or student put me in a dilemma. Ultimately, Father put an end to my indecision. "Your brother knows the outside world. He has been to many places, and he wants us to send you to school, not to the monastery. And, I don't want you to follow my path as a pastoralist," Father said. Mother, worried as always, was not pleased to let me leave her world. But, at the age of seven, I was sent to school on horseback just like Brother.

My reunion with Brother in primary school initiated mischievousness and adventure. From getting up to going to sleep, everything was new in the beginning. My dreams were disturbed by sharp whistles in the morning, and I was forced to go to bed when the guard blinked his flashlight. The classes started with a tinkling sound that emanated from a stone striking a metal board that hung from the eaves of our school kitchen. We were punished by having to sweep the schoolyard if we went outside the school grounds, which violated the rules. For several weeks, I underwent the hardships of an unfamiliar lifestyle but my life brightened as I adapted.

One thing forever etched in my mind is a game called

China and Japan. On Saturdays or Sundays, Brother and some students from our village escaped from school to play 'China and Japan' in nearby bushes along the river. We pretended pieces of wood were guns, swords, grenades, bombs, and so on. After arming ourselves, we divided into 'China' and 'Japan'. I usually was in the Japan group, which I didn't like because of Japan's notorious reputation. Students from the upper grade acted as Chinese soldiers, and the new and younger students were ordered to be Japanese soldiers. What vexed the Japanese soldiers was that the Chinese soldiers were immortal even if our wood guns pointed at their chests or grenades exploded at their feet. No matter how hard we yelled, "Bang! Bang! Bang!" the Chinese soldiers showed hardly any sign of distress. We Japanese soldiers, however, were killed once they saw us, and we were required to stumble to the ground. The Chinese soldiers were confident about their courage and believed that they were flawless. Victory was always theirs. The Chinese soldiers often said such things as, "You are dead, because I saw you." "Japanese soldiers' marksmanship is bad." "Japanese soldiers must die in every game and battle."

We spent hours and hours in the bushes. Chinese soldiers ran far and near to destroy all the Japanese soldiers. Their thirst for killing was insatiable. Yet, once we returned to school, there were no differences between us – we all had to sweep the schoolyard.

Japanese soldiers were depicted as merciless in school and this led to upper grade students denigrating those designated as Japanese soldiers in our games. Nevertheless, it was fun to play 'China and Japan'. I later led my village students to fight students from Jagongma Village. I desperately struggled to get the name 'China', feeling terrible distaste for the name 'Japan'.

As time went by, students played 'China and Japan' between the two villages, both fighting for the name 'China'. We young students, by then, had become the old students.

The school headmaster disliked this game and sporadically held meetings, criticizing how stupidly we acted among ourselves. He said we were all brothers and sisters with the same mythical ancestors, the rock ogress and the monkey.²⁰ This last comment led students to make fun of each other. Laughing and pointing fingers, the boys said to the girls, "Oh, you are the daughter of a rock ogress!" or "Are you a rock ogress?"

In return, the girls yelled, "Monkeys! Monkeys!" at the boys.

We all resumed the China and Japan game shortly after the meetings. We played in the ravine just behind our school, using stones to attack each other, which really hurt. I was hit on the head once, which left me bleeding. The competition between the two villages was intense. Every member of each village looked down on the other members, and our relationship steadily deteriorated.

One day, I led Rongrima Village students to roll big snowballs and pile them up on one side of the basketball court. Jagongma Village did the same on the other side. The snowballs were so big it was hard to lift them, yet our eagerness somehow made it possible. The piles were so high that they resembled giant walls. Making big snowballs was no easy task for we had to endure the bitter cold and bright light that pierced our eyes to build a snowball wall that was higher than the other village's wall. I felt safe behind that snowball wall.

Snowball fighting between the villages commenced with screams, yells, and vulgar language. We threw snowballs at each other with anger and hatred until someone came and stopped us. The teachers were busy playing mahjong. The headmaster was the only one who cared enough to come out and stop us.

If the snowballs had been only snowballs, there

²⁰ Believed to be the mythical ancestors of Tibetans.

would have been fewer problems. However, we put stones inside the snowballs. Hiding behind the snowball wall was the best defense. The pain was unbearable if you got hit, but this did not really stop us. Instead, it kindled hatred and pushed us to continue fighting.

Miraculously, I led my village students to victory one day and afterwards, I was a hero in my village. I hit the head of one of their boys in one snowball fight. He stumbled on their wall, and caused it to collapse. The next moment, holding snowballs in our hands, we drove them in all directions, thus gaining the name China.

ROBBED

There aren't any trees without nails in the forest, there aren't any men without weak points in the world." Many primary school teachers tell stories about how loyal and compassionate Tibetans are, and eloquently intersperse stories with touching episodes of Milarepa²¹ and Drimed Kundan.²² Children believe these stories and feel proud to be Tibetan. As a saying goes, "One who thinks highly of himself finds that his shit smells good." I do not remember my teachers saying anything unpleasant about my own people. The idea that my people were altruistic intoxicated me, until I experienced an incident which changed my perspective.

Father took me to the County Town when I was five. It was a nice trip and we encountered nothing unpleasant. I had a good impression. But then, after three years, I went to the County Town alone as a new student to attend another primary school. I was still a weak child.

²¹ Milarepa (1052-1135) was a great yogi who endured many difficulties and obtained enlightenment in one lifetime. He is one of Tibet's most famous poets and a major figure in the history of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. Milarepa's writings emphasize the temporary nature of the physical body and the need for non-attachment.

²² Drimed Kundan is a famous Tibetan drama. See <http://tibetanactor.com/2010/03/drimey-kunden/> (accessed 5 May 2011) for a summary of one version.

I was returning to school with my dorm mates at around eight p.m. one Saturday after strolling through the street the whole afternoon. The sun had already set. It was dark. Though totally silent on the grassland, the town still buzzed. Goose-necked street lamps ornamented the roads, people went in and out of shops, and music blared from loudspeakers. I was pleased to see this unfamiliar world a second time and looked around curiously.

Padma, Tashi Rabdin, and two others were there. We lived in the same dormitory room. I liked them and enjoyed their company. As we walked to our school located on the outskirts of town, we found no street lamps by the roads. It was dark and frightening. We walked silently until one of us said, "Let's catch up with those guys ahead of us." We quickened our pace. The figures grew larger in the dim moonlight. As we drew near, I felt relieved thinking the danger of darkness and robbery were solved. Four young people, clad in Tibetan robes and wearing hoods were holding flashlights. I thought they might be from a nearby pastoral community.

"Hey! Where are you going?" one demanded rudely, blocking our way. The other three pointed their flashlights in our faces, as if looking for lice like our mothers did under the dim firelight when we were small.

"To school," I replied honestly.

There was silence. By their actions and appearances, we thought they might be hooligans. Padma suggested leaving without evoking any disturbance. The ruffians discussed something among themselves as we timidly left. "Hey, wait!" they shouted and ran after us. "Why did you follow us? Did we steal something from you?" one scolded, pointing his forefinger at us.

I was stupefied. They were adults, and we were all kids under fifteen.

"We intended nothing like that. We are just on the way to school. Just let us just go to school, please," Tashi

Rabdin said.

"Without compensation for following us in such a sneaky fashion? You can't easily return to school. See this!" one of the bad guys barked, pulling a dog-beater²³ out from his right sleeve. The others fished out knives and dog-beaters from their robe pouches. I trembled like a sheep in front of a butcher. Anger, hatred, fear, and guilt tortured me. I longed for the fierce deities we made offerings to every day to protect us against such evil people, but deities are often invisible at such times.

"Give us your money and then you can go," one said, shining his flashlight in our faces.

"What? Give our money to you?" I exclaimed, not believing what I had heard.

I remembered Mother saying as she put the money in my pocket, "We are unable to send you money often. Use it carefully, and don't lose it. Keep it safe."

"Yes! Are you surprised?" one robber said forcefully, stepping forward, searching my pockets until he found my money.

I resisted, shouting, "Give it back, that's my money. That's all I have, please!" Ignoring my desperate shouts, he put the money in his robe pouch. My friends experienced the same tragedy.

For some time, the atmosphere was filled with our pitiful shouting, "Give my money back! Please return it!"

I heard the most unpleasant song that night, sung by those who robbed us. How happy and satisfied they were after robbing children. That was the first time I had a negative idea about my own ethnicity, which I found was imperfect, unlike what my primary teachers had told me.

Endless tears reddened our eyes and pitiful shouting made our throats sore. When I recall those hooded people

²³ A piece of metal attached to a yak-hide string that is used to fend off attacking dogs.

clad in Tibetan robes holding flashlights and glinting dog-beaters, I automatically recall the moment I took the money from Mother.

AN IRON LADLE

I used an iron ladle for a bowl while attending the county elementary school. It was cone shaped and lacked a handle. People looked at me curiously when they saw me eating from the ladle bowl. My only reaction was, "If you don't know what hides behind the ladle, don't look at me that way, please!"

The school cafeteria was a large open hall with round tables. There were no stools. We ate standing around the tables. Our heads bumped and our chopsticks tangled in the food served in a single big plate that we attacked every time we ate like a flock of vultures devouring a corpse. Meal times were crowded and loud. Students whistled, screamed, and yelled whenever something unusual happened. Fighting occurred every day.

I fought with a boy who spilled porridge on my Tibetan robe one morning. He did not even offer a simple apology. Rage pushed me into a fight. I grabbed his hair and punched him in the face, as he tried to kick my shins and hit my stomach. People watched as we clutched each other tightly and fought. I longed for a teacher, a cook, or a student to intervene. Nobody came. Courage is limited and we stopped after a while.

Another time I slipped on the wet kitchen floor, fell on my back, and one of my muddy shoes brushed a student's trousers. The apology I offered was ignored. Red faced, he began rubbing mud from his trousers. His murmurings were inaudible, since all the students roared and hit their

chopsticks on their bowls and basins. I felt my face burning.

The boy I had offended was about my height, skinny, and wore a pair of nice jeans and a jacket embroidered with a dragon on the back. I knew he was from a class that had most of their subjects taught in the Chinese language. In contrast, I was in a class with most subjects taught in the Tibetan language – the Tibetan major class. We hated each other. I was lucky that he did not punch me. Fear nested in my heart and I became cautious. "There will be a fight, I can feel it," I told myself and prepared.

With a red face and panting angrily, the guy I offended stopped me in front of the cafeteria, on the narrow concrete path ornamented by thick trees on each side. He patted me on my shoulder sarcastically while his quivering voice managed, "Boy, let's have a little talk. Follow me!" He grabbed me by my arm and began to take me from the crowd. The passersby watched us over their shoulders.

"We have nothing to talk about," I retorted. It dawned on me that he was planning to take revenge for my dirtying his trousers. Though I felt afraid, I could not accept following somebody like a dog.

"Cowardly dog! Your parents gave you little courage and bravery. Do you still nurse your mother's tit?" he said. Those near us stopped, hoping entertainment would ensue.

Exasperated, I smashed a plastic bowl on his head with all my might. The bowl broke into pieces. I kicked and punched like a mad man. The power of my anger and hatred was immense. As if glued together, we grabbed one another's hair tightly, not letting go. I yanked his hair as hard as I could and wisps of it fell to the ground. He jerked my hair. My scalp felt like it was going to come off. Other students surrounded us yelling, whistling, and shouting. I heard the tinkling sound of chopsticks hitting bowls and the excited shouts of entertained students. Raised fists, the cheering crowd, and dreadful curses maddened the atmosphere. My opponent and I were no more than cocks trained to fight.

While we were struggling in the midst of anger, the crowd suddenly quieted and scattered. Somebody grabbed my neck and lifted me in the air. I was almost strangled. I tried to breathe and moved my feet frantically. Still, the strong hand reigned over me.

There is a saying, "Even an old wolf can catch sheep." A teacher easily controlled the two of us. The boy and I were coughing hard and holding our throats when the teacher finally released us. Pal pe, the teacher in charge of the week's regulations, recited:

Ignorant people are cocky,
Learned people are humble.
Small streams roar down mountain valleys,
Vast oceans seldom make a noise.²⁴

"Do you know what this verse means? It means you still have much to learn. You have to be like oceans, not streams," Teacher Pal pe said. Though he appeared old, he was strong and tall. Students both respected and feared him. They called him 'Crow', behind his back because he always had bad news to announce. His calmness, seriousness, and well-built body intimidated students.

"What on earth are you fighting for? Any reason?" he questioned. We kept quiet, daring not to make more mistakes. Our silence irritated him. He suddenly yelled, "I said why were you fighting?" His eyeballs rolled in deep eye

²⁴ This verse is a variation of what was written by Kunga Gyaltsan (1182-1251), a Tibetan spiritual leader and Buddhist scholar who was well known in India, China, Mongolia, and Tibet. He is generally known as Sakya Pandita in recognition of his scholarly achievements, and also for his knowledge of Sanskrit, and the belief that he is an emanation of the Bodhisattva Manjushri, the embodiment of the wisdom of all Buddhas.

sockets as his face darkened and frowned. He was even more frightening.

A terrible beating was imminent, I thought. I was right. He grabbed my chest with his right hand and slapped my face hard with his left hand. Immediately, my face burned and began swelling. My teeth hurt. I tasted blood in my mouth. I was like a lamb in his clutches. Meanwhile, the other boy was left untouched.

I couldn't remember when he stopped beating me, but it must have been a long time because later my shins were terribly bruised, and my muscles ached terribly. I couldn't feel my scalp because he had pulled my hair so crazily. I was so beaten that I could hardly walk. All my hate and anger turned upon him rather than the guy I had offended.

"It was not entirely my fault," I thought.

The teacher said, "Without another object, one hand cannot make a sound." Thinking how unfair the teacher was, I felt emotionally wounded, sad, and lonely.

"Do you still want to fight?" asked the teacher, his volcano-like anger still erupting.

Silence.

"What are you looking at?" he bellowed at the onlookers, chasing them, and throwing whatever he could pick up at them. The audience vanished in a second.

The teacher went to eat and told us to stand there until he returned. Looking at each other over our shoulders guiltily, we stood rigid for more than two hours. I felt dizzy in the sunshine. I was so beaten I thought I could not bear the increasing pain in my feet and shins. I longed to put the teacher in my shoes. He would, I hoped, cry for his mother, stumble on the ground, and beg for mercy. Yet, my red-hot hate, somehow, was cooling.

I had received gifts from friends and relatives, but also apologies from short-tempered classmates and buddies. I had experienced love and kindness after whippings and won prizes for doing what pleased others, but I had never

received an apology from an enemy.

I could not believe my ears when I heard 'sorry' from the boy next to me. "Impossible! We fought like a savage tiger and a wild yak," I thought. I did not turn to him because I thought maybe I was hallucinating. "It would be a miracle if an enemy becomes a friend. It won't happen," I thought.

"Sorry, I didn't know the teacher would beat you so much," he said, looking at me sincerely. I enjoyed seeing my enemies beaten by teachers, and the idea of apologizing to one I hated had never occurred to me. I didn't know how to react. I realized how considerate he was to ask for forgiveness.

"It's unfair for the teacher to beat only you. I know you feel the same way," he said.

"It's OK," I replied, feeling uncomfortable and guilty.

We talked about how desperately we had fought. I told him how I smashed my bowl on his head. He was not injured or bruised, but there was a lump on his head, as large as a big thumb. I said, "You pulled my hair so hard." We continued talking and laughing.

A Chinese saying goes, "There are no friends without fights." We exemplified this. The feeling of making an enemy a friend was much more pleasant than making an ordinary friend.

The teacher later came holding a ladle in his hand. I thought he was insane. He silently stood before us for a while, then said, "You can go," to my newly made friend. He knew that we were reconciled. My new buddy left with an innocent smile on his pale face. "Well, I brought you this," the teacher said, lifting the iron ladle in the air, "You may use it as a bowl for the rest of the semester."

"OK," I replied reluctantly.

"Fighting is good sometimes. At least, it shows your courage and bravery," he said. "But fighting is not what educated people do. We need to be tolerant instead of flaunting our courage and bravery. There are many ways to

solve problems."

It was unfair that he had the name 'Crow', since keeping us in line was his duty.

I used that ladle as my bowl until graduation from elementary school. I don't remember how I lost it. It was the most unforgettable bowl I ever used.

FATHER

I hated Father for beating me often. As if they were on the same side, Mother said, "A person scolds and teaches you because they care for you." I pondered this as a child. I felt that there was an invisible river, a certain distance between my parents and me. The question, "If you care about me, why do you have to beat and scold me?" came to me now and then. The answer never came.

Time passed like water flowing. I became a grade two student in Martang Tibetan Middle School and was separated again from my parents. I felt relieved when school began, thinking I had escaped scolding and beating. The teachers, however, considered themselves 'second mothers' and thought of us as their 'children'. Slaps, scolding, and beatings were inescapable. I did not think of beatings as a way of showing love, but my teachers and my parents did. That was why I questioned the nature of love, not knowing what love really was. It was later that I came to know that Father loved me.

During winter holiday, Brother Tenzen came to town to get me. After packing some books in my bag, I mounted the horse he had brought for me, and we rode home. Deep inside, something was pushing me to go home early. Though there were worries about scolding and beatings from Father, an aura of happiness and familial togetherness rose in my heart. I was astonished when I realized Father did not recognize me.

"Who is he?" Father asked. My vulnerable heart went

cold.

Mother answered while I greeted Father and sat next to him. I had sat on his lap during my childhood. Now it was different.

Throughout the winter holiday, Father behaved insanely. He went to fetch water once and came back hurriedly. His face was pale and frightened. When he saw Brother and me, he yelled, "Why don't you go kill the fire! Useless sons, useless!" grabbed an ax, and ambled to the river. His inaudible mumblings reverberated in my ears, causing pain and fear.

People put out grassland fires with old, wet clothes. I had witnessed such scenes, but I had never seen someone put a fire out with an ax. I thought it was just age that made him insane. Before he went far, Mother shouted from inside the house, "Stop him! Stop him!"

I looked at Brother who was standing by me. I hesitated. Brother rushed at Father and snatched the ax from him. Soon there was a dispute over the ax between Father and Brother. Father continued bellowing about the 'fire' and stubbornly refused to hand the ax to Brother. There was, of course, no fire.

"Our neighbor caused this tragedy. Oh, homage to The Three Jewels! Please return our father to us," Mother pleaded. I felt like a rock, with no emotion.

There was a story behind his madness. Sitting on the right side of the metal stove in the middle of our wood house, Mother sipped milk tea and tearfully told me the story:

The surroundings were as dark as a black veil one quiet night about a month ago. The moon and all the stars seemed to be hiding from something. The horses were low-spirited and the yaks were unusually silent in their enclosure. We and the neighbors went to bed early as usual, not thinking anything about the unusual environment and livestock. The lights shining from the windows of our

neighbors' houses went out one after another.

The dogs barked ferociously around midnight, making loud sounds from the chains that restrained them. Yaks ran wildly in the enclosure. The mooing of yaks and the neighing of horses filled the valley. Immediately, we went out with flashlights to investigate. Your father went to check on the horses, since he is fond of them. He came back saying, "Something is wrong, I have a feeling."

He was right. The neighbors shouted that their horses had been stolen as we were about to return to bed.

It was a matter of life and death to follow the thieves, armed with guns and knives. Our old, crippled neighbor, Jyambal, borrowed one of our horses and helped. Your father and Jyambal together saddled the horses and followed the thieves empty-handed in the charcoal-like darkness. You can imagine how worried I was when your father left with nothing but courage, and whose life had become the target of the thieves. If unexpected misfortune happens, how will I care for six children scattered everywhere?

Your father and Old Jyambal did not even have time to make incense offerings to our mountain deity and family protectors. Tenzen Tsering made incense offerings and called on the family protectors for help on their behalf in the middle of the night. We spent days praying for their safe return. Worry and anxiety consumed us after their departure.

Mother stopped to sip tea. Father loved depicting Chairman Mao as a savior. Father's mother was an unmarried servant woman in a rich family and his early life had been hard. His father would always be unknown to him. Chairman Mao seemed to be Father's father, dramatically changing his living condition and social status. He admired Chairman Mao with all his heart. Mother, on the contrary, understood Mao as a gargantuan monster. Whenever we talked about

him, she often said, "He only drinks blood, the blood of humans and my uncles."

Mother continued:

One day, Old Jyambal and your father returned, leading the stolen horses. But your father's horse, his favorite, was nowhere to be seen. I knew something had happened, but I didn't care so much, because having him return safely meant everything to me. I only learned later that his horse had been shot as they chased after the thieves. Your father and the horse fell to the frozen ground. Your father injured his head and was unconscious for a time. He stayed with his horse until its last breath in that barren place. It took a long time to search for the thieves with only one horse, but eventually, they got the horses back.

Your Father began to lose his memory and act strangely as the days passed. He and his horse stumbling to the ground played over and over in his mind. He talked about the accident constantly. "It's dark. Can you see the moon and the stars?" he would ask.

We went to see the township doctors, but they couldn't help. I'm thinking about going to the county hospital to check his head with X-rays when school starts. We have no time to waste.

Father's illness worsened several days before school started. It seemed he was a possessed spirit medium. He shook and mumbled senseless words as though he were a prophet, speaking of imminent disasters — floods, earthquakes, and fire. Mother was frightened by her lifelong companion's illness, called some relatives, and took Father to Barkam, the prefecture capital, for treatment, leaving us alone.

While Father was recovering in the hospital, Brother Balden Tsering came to our winter pasture one afternoon. He told me his main goal was to take me to school and inform

our relatives about Father. Knowing of Brother's arrival, our neighbors came to inquire about Father. With a sigh of relief, they left one after another. Brother Balden was exhausted from walking from the township town to the winter pasture. He had not walked so far since becoming an official in the county town. Brother told me this story after a rest:

We were about to get on the bus at the bus station in the county town to go to the provincial hospital. Father suddenly yelled, "I'm not getting on the bus!" Everyone was surprised. Mother and other relatives tried to persuade him but it was in vain. Father then said, "Without Renchin, I'm not going anywhere." We were desperate. We tried to push him on the bus, but he was unbelievably strong. Later we told him you were on the bus, and he finally boarded. The door immediately shut behind us.

Father began yelling again when he found you were not in the bus. "You left Renchin at the bus station, you bastards!" he yelled. Everyone in the bus was annoyed, yet they respected our situation. Throughout the journey, Father murmured, "Oh, dear Renchin! He is abandoned, alone at the bus station. Oh dear Renchin!"

Father cares and loves you most. When you are old enough, you will know how much he loves you.

"What's wrong with Father?" I asked.

"His brain was damaged when he fell on the frozen ground," Brother said. X-rays showed blood had accumulated in his brain. The doctors suggested a brain operation, and he is now recovering."

The bus station events put me in a state of deep thought. "Why was I the one he was most concerned about? Why me?" I wondered. I turned the pages of my memory book and noted that he occasionally beat me and I hated him for that. Yet, throughout my childhood, I had loved to sit on his lap, loved the name Blacky he had given me, and loved

him showing me how to make catapults, paper airplanes, and other toys.

Mother says, "If you don't praise good people, they lose heart. If you don't punish bad people, they scold you." I belonged to the latter, unaware of Father's kindness, care, and love. I despised myself for having had negative thoughts about him.

I realized I was the one creating distance between myself and my parents and teachers who took me as their 'son'. I realized how important they were in my life. I decided to eliminate the wall between us. Reaching that conclusion, I slept comfortably until the morning sun peeked over the mountains.

TAXES

I paid my very first tax to my primary school with animal bones and empty beer bottles. Students were ordered to collect fifty kilos of animal bones and twenty empty beer bottles during winter and summer vacations. Students who did not collect the required number were punished by having to sweep the school yard for a whole semester. Some other students and I were punished when the second semester began. We were told to sweep the yard every Wednesday and Saturday. It was backbreaking work, since the yard was big and dirty. Torn paper, plastic bags, and candy wrappers were everywhere. We had to catch them as the wind blew them here and there. Dust rose and choked us as we swept, covering our clothes and hair with dust. The idea of escaping temporarily popped into my mind, but it was impossible. There were students eager to report our laziness and supervisors observed us from a distance.

Like bees searching for honey, students collected animal bones and beer bottles during the vacations. Armed with ropes to drag bones home and bags for the bottles, students went everywhere searching for skeletons and bottles. Instead of finishing homework, students spent their vacations this way. Nobody knew what the bones and bottles were for, and no one asked.

I found bones and bottles at abandoned camps. Finding a bone was like finding a gold nugget. Sometimes, several students happened to be in the same camp, meaning fights over bones and bottles ensued. Knowing of the

conflicts over bones and bottles, Mother said, "Strolling through abandoned encampments and fighting over bones. There is no difference between dogs and students!"

Sweeping the school yard was much harder than looking for bones and bottles. Once a new semester began, our school was shrouded in the rotten, pungent smell of animal bones, piled in a hill in a school yard corner. I vomited more than once when I swept near that pile.

Tax and tuition were part of my life as a middle school student. Unlike bones and bottles, we were told to dig half a kilo of fritillary²⁵ every summer holiday, as well as pay tuition. I don't remember any physical punishment for not digging fritillary and not paying the tuition, but we were told we could not attend classes unless we did. Father took Brother and me for half a month to dig fritillary in our autumn camp, which was in the mountains and stunningly beautiful from June to September. Wild flowers bobbed their heads to the rhythm of the streams, and murmured in gentle breezes. Countless bird chirps resounded in the forest. Animals peeked from a distance and vanished in a moment. I loved the beautiful environment and clean air.

We lived under a big pine tree. Father loved to simplify and we brought little in the way of cooking utensils, bedding, and food. Our food only lasted fifteen days, which was the time we had for digging fritillary. Brother and I were given picks and little bags for storing the fritillary.

The digging began after breakfast when the morning dew had dried. I detected the presence of other diggers by the smoke from their temporary residences. Small groups of diggers were everywhere. After looking around for a moment, Brother and I began digging diligently. We meticulously looked for fritillary leaves, our bodies bent forward and eyes almost touching the ground. Fritillary resembled other

²⁵ This pea-sized white bulb is an important Tibetan medicinal plant.

vegetation and was hard to find, since it grows with weeds and grass. As soon as I found one, I began digging. The fritillary bulb is small and white, and grows about three to five centimeters under the ground. The bag hanging from my waist grew bigger and more visible as I added bulbs.

The other diggers in the autumn camp were farmers from Durfa, Chomkun, and Tso dun in Barkam. Neighboring villagers came in the morning and returned at dusk, riding horses in groups. They knew they were not permitted to dig herbs on our land, but they still came. Our regional patrolmen were very serious about diggers from outside. To shut us up, the farmers gave us homemade bread, apples, pears, beans, and vegetables.

I had to turn in a half kilo of dried fritillary to the school. The tax collectors of my school took only well-dried and completely white fritillary. Father dried the fritillary after returning from the autumn camp. He sat patiently by our summer tent, spread the fritillary on a blanket, and never used his hands to stir them. Our oily hands turned the fritillary yellow, which buyers considered bad. My well-dried fritillary satisfied the tax collectors because of father's skill.

Brother and I thus learned how to dry the herbs and were told to guard them against yaks and birds. I found myself overly responsible, since fritillary determined my education, and the fear of losing my opportunity to attend school was dreadful. I paid much attention to yaks, birds, bad weather, and even wind, for they play prominent roles in drying fritillary.

RIDDLES

Darkness slowly veiled the earth. It was quiet all around. One or two stars began winking as the moon hid behind the eastern mountains. Under this very dim light, every sentient being enjoyed the serenity of the night. A gentle breeze blew as I stood at the doorway with my cousin, Delek Drolma, who had come to fetch me that afternoon with Norzin, her younger sister. Delek Drolma and I were playmates and classmates. We grew up together and invited each other to visit during holidays.

"Let's go inside, Renchin," Delek Drolma said, leading the way into her wood house, which was similar to my family's. The smell of yak dung and smoke wafted around me as I followed her inside.

"Where is Uncle Zangko? I haven't seen him for quite a long time," I said, sitting cross-legged by the fire. The others were still busy with the yaks and sheep. Only the two of us were in the house.

"Father and the others will be here soon. Relax!" she said, giving me a clean bowl and pouring milk-tea into it.

Silence.

I looked around as I sipped tea. The fire and the butter lamp on the altar were silently emanating light. Smoke sinuously rose from the fire and writhed into the vast sky.

Feeding the fire, Delek Drolma asked me what I wanted to eat. It is our custom to give our best food to invited guests. While I was insisting on her not cooking anything, Uncle and the others arrived, having finished their

evening duties.

"What are you arguing about?" Uncle asked calmly, sitting by the fire.

"We are arguing about what to eat. He prefers *tsamba*," Delek Drolma replied. The others laughed, making me blush.

"OK. How about rice with a meat dish and a celery dish, Big Earlobes?" Uncle asked.

I nodded in agreement.

Uncle said, "Don't ask if someone wants to eat, just give. Don't ask if clothes are beautiful, just wear them," hinting that Delek Drolma had made a mistake in asking what I wanted to eat.

"Rice! That's ant excrement!" Norzin said.

"Ant excrement! That's like a riddle," I commented.

While Delek Drolma and her mother cooked, Norzin and I told riddles. Despite her young age, she had learned many from her grandparents.

Sitting beside Uncle on the men's side of the house with a smiling face, Norzin said, "What is the yak that only moves its mane?"

I thought but could only answer, "A shadow," which occurred to me as Delek Drolma moved under the firelight. Since I had three chances to guess the answer, I also guessed, 'cloud' and 'prayer flag'.

"Now beg for the answer and I'll tell you," Norzin said as I finished the three allowed answers. The triumphant look she wore blended with pride and self-confidence. I admitted my failure.

"*Om ma ni padme hum! Om ma ni padme hum! Om ma ni padme hum!*" I chanted, facing Norzin, pleading for the answer with my thumbs up.

"It's a Tibetan tent. The tent-flap moves, but the tent itself doesn't move when the wind blows," Norzin said.

"OK. I'll ask you a riddle. You can't ask Uncle and the others," I said.

"I won't," Norzin asked, eager to hear my riddle.

"The yak that does not move, but its intestines do. Tell me what it is," I said.

"People moving inside a tent. I know that," she replied.

"The flesh of a tiger was eaten, and the skin was thrown away. What is that?" I asked.

Norzin had never heard this riddle. She guessed once and then asked others, breaking her promise, but was not given the answer. She finally begged for the answer.

"Chinese wrapped tea," I said.

Delek Drolma and her mother finished cooking and served the food. While they handed us bowls of rice, Norzin again mentioned ant excrement. Uncle told her not to talk about disgusting things, but he was still very kind to Norzin. I thought that it was because she was the youngest, like me in my home.

At bed time, Delek Drolma, Norzin, and I slept side by side. We told riddles and stories until it was very late. Delek Drolma, though quiet, was full of riddles and stories. It was a warm cheerful atmosphere. Later, Delek Drolma joked that I had accumulated merit because I chanted the Six Sacred Syllables many times since I did not know the answers.

That night, I learned many riddles from my two cousins, Delek Drolma and Norzin:

- What's outside in the daytime and in the house during the night? (a urinal)
- A bird from India dipped its beak in the blue sea and hovered over the vast grassland. What are they? (pen, ink, paper)
- One is on the right side of the mountain. The other is on the other side of the mountain. They hear from each other

but never meet. (ears)

- A wood bucket target and ivory colored arrows. What are they? (milking with a bucket)
- What runs day and night and sings day and night? (a river)
- Not a bird, but it has wings.
Not a cat, but it has claws.
Not a wild yak, but it has horns.
Not a tiger, but it has spots.
Not a mouse, but it lives like a mouse. (a bee)
- What are red as a cassock outside but white as ivory inside? (wild yams)
- It is white and screams in the monastery. (conch-shell)
- A plant with one root but thousands of leaves. (barley)
- They are full of something during the day, but empty at night. (shoes)
- A yak tied by hundreds of ropes. (yak-hair tent)
- Flying birds without lungs.
Black-headed people without tails.
Female yaks without upper teeth.
A bouncy hornless horse.
Barking dogs without hind heels.
Mice without chains on their necks.
White sheep without riders.
Snoring rabbits without fangs.
Chirping magpies without kidneys. (The nine things that do

not exist.)²⁶

I was sometimes sad about not having grandparents. Their early departure left a gap in my life. Other children learned many stories, riddles, and sayings from their grandparents. I missed all of that.

²⁶ See Blo rtan rdo rje, C Stuart, and G Roche. 2009. Amdo Tibetan Tongue Twisters. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 1:7-51 (pp 45-47) for a discussion of 'The Nine Non-existences'.

A LUNAR ECLIPSE

The shadow of the west mountains covered the earth as I left the tent. The sun ebbed away behind the mountains like a crawling baby about to reach its mother. And like the baby who stops crying after reaching its mother, daytime noises were swallowed by darkness. It was deathly quiet. Rongrima Village seemed undisturbed alongside the flowing river under the moonlight.

Our family tent was pitched on a little hill, allowing me a view of the whole camp. Leaning against a tent rope, I looked down the valley. Herds of yaks and dots of tents were visible along the winding river. A sense of serenity was so powerful that the appearance of the moon on the water was a disturbance. Women busily tied yaks in enclosures, preparing for the next day's milking. As I was about to enter the tent, Mother called, "Dear son, is there fire in the stove?" I guessed Brother had left or had lost some yaks in the mountains. Every time we lost an animal, Mother made incense offerings to our family tutelary deities and mountain deities, to beseech protection for the animals.

"Mother, did we lose yaks again?" I asked. The darkness reminded me how frightening it was to search for lost animals at such times. Though I did not have to search for missing livestock, a feeling of fear arose as I noticed glinting flashlights in the distance, and heard sporadic barking. Father's stories about hunters meeting ghosts and being gulped down in the darkness and dense forests came to mind.

"No, your brother herded well today. I think Dazan²⁷ is coming," Mother said.

I had witnessed Dazan eating the moon before, but it confused me when the moon appeared again around midnight.

"Chant *mani* if you can, dear son," she said, leaving me at the door. She entered the tent murmuring the Six Sacred Syllables. Chanting *mani* and scriptures was good for all sentient beings when Dazan ate the moon. I stood at the door alone, gazing into space to see what was happening to the moon.

Thinking it might just be clouds covering the moon, I looked up carefully. Only the edge of the moon, resembling a strip of yellow silk, was visible. I saw neither clouds nor anything else that I could name. Seeing the gradual disappearance of the moon, I recalled Ayi Tsomo, an elderly woman living with her son telling me about Dazan when I occasionally visited them with Mother:

A gigantic monster called Dazan lives in the sky. Sometimes people call it Gza.²⁸ Its throat has a big hole. It emerges from its den to eat the moon once every year. After it gulps the moon, all living beings on Earth live in darkness. Thousands and thousands of living beings die as the monster gulps the moon. In order to save the moon and all living beings, people fire guns and make offerings, especially incense offerings to the mountain deities. People also ride horses and run on the grassland, letting loose the reins. When the monster smells the gunpowder and hears the sounds of horse hooves, he thinks people are pursuing him and then he drops the moon from his hollow throat.

²⁷ 'Dazan' literally translates as 'moon eater' and refers to a lunar eclipse.

²⁸ Gza refers to Dazan as used here and means 'planet'.

The intoxicating smell of smoldering incense wafted in the air as Mother emerged, holding a pot of smoldering sacred juniper leaves. She was chanting *mani* and reciting incantations about Dazan.

"Here, go circle the yak-enclosure and fumigate the yaks," Mother said. This was done to protect them from disease and dangerous animals, and sometimes to sanitize them. The powdered juniper leaves were given by the local monastery to fumigate livestock and heal people's minor ailments. Since the monks had done so much chanting and read so many scriptures over the juniper leaves, it was invisibly powerful.

As I circled the yaks by our tent, the Earth trembled under my feet. I was shocked. I thought Dazan was gulping down the earth. The yaks mooed frantically and lurched back and forth in the yak-enclosure. Horses whinnied and galloped about. Dogs barked ferociously to the rhythm of clanking chains.

Someone down the valley shouted, "Oh! Ra mda rgyugs! Ra mda rgyugs!"²⁹ I was so terrified that my scalp tingled. I hurried, wanting to reach the tent quickly. Guns sounded in the distance one after another, and horse hooves hitting the ground made the earth tremble. I realized people were pursuing Dazan. I got my nerve back as I reached the tent. Having finished their work, Brother Tenzen Tsering, my sisters, and Father were at the gate talking about Dazan.

"Where is Dazan, Father?" I asked since I saw nothing but darkness. Dazan neither seemed to be wolves coming to eat sheep nor stray dogs stealing meat from our yak-hair tent.

"I don't really know, but it is in the darkness," Father replied.

²⁹ Ra mda rgyugs = 'go after lost things' and, as used here, refers to the moon.

"How strange! That's why people call you Gya³⁰ Shirab," Mother retorted, going inside the tent. She believes those who have strange ideas are like Chinese, such as one who claims that there are no ghosts and gods, no mountain deities, no Heaven, and no Hell.

Big incense offerings were glowing here and there all down the valley, lighting the darkness. I sniffed the smoke in the wind, laden with the odors of burning *tsamba*, cheese, and butter. The shouts of men, women, and children reverberated throughout the valley.

Time passed rapidly. We stayed in the tent under the firelight talking about Dazan and related things. Brother said, "A spaceship or clouds might be covering the moon. It's not being eaten, it's being covered since it appears again."

Through our evening meal, the shouting and gunfire continued. Our only light was the fire. We talked about Dazan in the darkness, of how all the gleaming stars and the moon fell victim to Dazan. Suddenly, Brother Tenzen Tsering pointed to the tent skylight and shouted, "See! It's coming back!" jumped up, and ran outside. I followed.

Like a newly flowering bud, the moon bloomed in the darkness. As the sickle-like moon resumed its normal round shape, I recalled Ayi Tsomo telling me another Dazan story:

A skillful hunter lived in a peaceful village. All the villagers admired his marksmanship. He was so skilled that he could hit any target. Then one evening, the moon was eaten by the monster, Dazan. The villagers made offerings and chased after Dazan, riding horses, yelling, and firing guns, but all was in vain. The moon, by then, was being gulped down by the monster. A villager remembered the hunter, and they all agreed to ask for his help. The hunter took his bow and arrow, pulled his bowstring with all his might and

³⁰ Gya 'Chinese' 'China'.

shot the monster's throat with an arrow, and the moon fell from the monster's throat. Afterward, there was a moon in the sky and all beings on earth rejoiced in the moonlight.

People fired guns and shouted excitedly as the moon reappeared. All believed Dazan was killed by the hunter or scared by the gunfire, shouting, and the repeated incantations. With victory, the noises soon died away. The moon radiated light to the world to show appreciation to the people for saving its life.

LOVE

I was in the dormitory smoking, which made me forget my troubles. Though the effect was ephemeral and unhealthy, I enjoyed every puff. I was new to smoking and the strong nicotine coupled with the bright sunlight pouring through the window gave me a headache. A whistle sounded outside. I hastily snuffed out the cigarette and closed the window. My friend, Tsering Nyamgyal, rushed in murmuring and complaining, "Those bastards in the administrative office! I hate weekend gatherings!"

We headed to the schoolyard center where a stage stood and gatherings were held. Chabudag held a long stick and bellowed at the students, "Run faster, you Hell realm creatures!" We ran faster, daring not to reply. Showing resentment earned a beating.

Lined up class by class, we waited for the school administrative officials. Under the scorching sunlight, students looked weary. It was a rule we had to wear Tibetan robes, no matter how hot the weather.

Chabudag and Gaji were on the platform when I raised my head. They regulated school rules. Holding a bunch of papers in his right hand, Chabudag came to the front of the platform. He was short, fat, dark-skinned, and had curly hair. He spoke perfect Amchok nomad dialect. Unlike other middle school teachers, he vulgarly scolded the students and always held a stick.

Gaji was tall, very fat, and smoked a lot. His Murghe Tibetan accent sounded like birds chirping. We understood

little of what he said.

Chabudag held some papers in the air and said, "I don't want to talk nonsense, but these bastards forced me to talk. I guess I have to embarrass them since they don't respect me. These papers will show you how dirty and filthy they are." He took a paper from his pocket and said, "Whoever is called, come stand here on the platform. Tashi Dundrup, from senior grade one and Drolma from junior grade three, Oser and Shirabtso from junior grade two, Dorjee and Renchintso..." Chabudag finally finished. I didn't know what these students had done wrong. I was bewildered. The dancing platform was filled with an equal number of boys and girls.

Chabudag looked tall and big on the platform. In his hoarse voice, he continued, "These people standing on the platform are shameless. They don't understand where they are. This is not a disordered society, it's a school. Finding boyfriends and girlfriends will never be permitted as long as Gaji and I are here. See? They wrote to each other, saying, 'I love you, do you love me? Please reply soon or I cannot sleep.' How ridiculous! Shameless! You are driven by desire and lust! You'd better heed your morals instead of fulfilling your desire. If I catch you putting love letters under your pillow there will be no good result."

Bumping heads and turning to each other, students murmured among themselves. I realized that these students were couples and fear crept inside me, since I had sent a letter to a girl a week before telling her of my special feelings for her and had met her behind the school cafeteria one afternoon. She was short and had a beautiful smile and nice teeth.

We were dismissed after Gaji detailed the punishments for those who had been caught. Talking in small groups, we headed to the dormitory again. Sonam, one of my friends, approached while I was going to the dormitory with Tsering Nyamgyal.

"Lucky man, you didn't get caught," Sonam blurted.

"Shut up! Sonam," I said.

Tsering Nyamgyal understood immediately and said, "What are you hiding? Spit it out!" he said.

"Later," I answered. I had sent a letter to a girl a week before through Sonam. Times were hard when expecting something you longed for dearly. The past week had crawled by as I waited for a reply.

"Isn't it illegal to invade others' privacy? I mean... the school administrative officials searching for love letters under our pillows while we are in class!" Sonam said.

"Of course! We are entitled to our secrets. When somebody invades our privacy, that person can be accused," I responded.

"Can you sue the school administrative office staff – Chabudag and Gaji?" Tsering Nyamgyal asked.

I said I dared not. The school regulations had tamed us.

Sonam fished out a love letter from his pocket later in the dormitory and handed it to me. I did not expect a letter at such a time since the administrative staff was searching for couples. Expecting a letter of rejection, I opened it carefully. Both Sonam and Tsering Nyamgyal seemed more nervous than I. They said that it was an acceptance letter, since the letter was folded in the shape of a heart. I opened and read a single sentence: "You may know a person's face but not his mind."

"What does this mean?" I asked, lighting a cigarette.

"You have a chance, boy!" Sonam replied.

"But what does it mean? Tell me," I said.

"It means that you need to write a convincing letter and ask for a chance to demonstrate your true love. Remember to ornament your sentences in the letter and pay attention to your handwriting. Girls care about these things," Sonam said.

Following Sonam's instructions, I wrote a letter that

weekend. Tearing and throwing papers in the dustbin again and again, I concentrated on winning her love with my letter. Finishing the letter took me the whole weekend. My letter was simple.

Dear Lebo,

I received your letter. It is so simple and true that it made me even crazier about you. Your letter bewitched me. I won't force you to accept me out of mere selfishness, for love means mutual agreement. But please remember my innocent young heart that cannot bear rejection. It would be the most wonderful thing if our budding love flowered even though the weather is harsh and ruthless in our school. Please burn this letter when you finish reading it.

Reply soon!

Renchin

Lebo thus became my girlfriend. She was eighteen, I was seventeen. Our love was like a flower growing from the crevice of a boulder, since we started our relationship while the school was searching for people like us. We lacked courage to meet. We sent letters to each other through Sonam. The feeling of having a girlfriend was good. I loved watching her from a distance.

A year passed sending letters and loving each other surreptitiously. Lebo told me she would attend a vocational school instead of senior middle school. Her imminent departure complicated my life. I thought about it in the classroom, in the dormitory, and everywhere. I especially thought about it when I was alone. The term ended. She graduated. We met on a bridge over the Yellow River one afternoon. That was the first time I met her face to face. I was nervous. I hated my inexperience and the school for controlling me. "So, you graduated?" I said, leaning on the bridge guardrail. The gently flowing river was crystal clear, running to another world, just as she too was going to another world. The trees and bushes were exuberant, but autumn frost and winter snow would soon make them resemble skeletons.

She nodded, gazing into my eyes. Only then did I realize how much I loved her. Lustrous braided hair, long lashes, dark eyes, fair complexion, flowering smile—all were so attractive that I could not take my eyes off her.

We leaned on the guardrail and watched the scenery. We talked very little. I enjoyed the stillness and being with her, since she was my first love. My innermost heart agonized when I thought of her departure. Though she had promised to keep in touch with me, it seemed that she was forever leaving my world.

Going in two opposite directions, Lebo and I parted after saying goodbyes. My heart ached as I watched her back, blurring into the distance. The picture she had given me made me feel as good as though she was right beside me and

comforting me. She wore a fox-skin hat and leaned against a motorbike in that picture – the only evidence of our relationship.

THE ENGLISH TRAINING PROGRAM

Lebo never wrote to me, and I never heard anything about her. It is devastating to hear nothing from a lover. I had difficulty in passing the days and weeks at first. But, unexpectedly, another girl stole my heart. I could not resist, since she stole it so innocently and naturally. She was plump and her gentle personality trapped me. There was no escape. By then, the memory of Lebo had faded. I concluded, "To forget a girl, one needs to find another girl."

Dorjee Tso and I had been classmates for three years. I could not understand why I hadn't fallen in love with her before Lebo. Like falling into a bottomless pit, I fell deeply in love with Dorjee Tso. Unlike my ex-girlfriend and me, Dorjee Tso and I never wrote love letters or said, "I love you," to each other. Our relationship somehow commenced without notice, but then at some point I realized she was part of my world.

Because of my frequent visits to her desk, my friends, Chojee and Tsowo, joked that I was like a river running to the ocean. They also said I was like an eagle, flying to Dorjee Tso automatically. 'Eagle' became a secret nickname for me among my friends. Superficially, I resented my friends calling me the 'Eagle' but deep inside, I loved it.

Since we were in the same class, we spent much time together, but I feared that one of us would fly away, like Lebo had flown away. The thought of being left alone popped into my mind at times. Later, I stopped thinking about departure and cherished studying and playing together.

Time passed quickly and without me noticing. The second semester of senior grade one put more wrinkles on our foreheads. We struggled with our studies, uncertain about the future. Dorjee Tso and I repeated the same daily routine, a life without ups and downs.

Then, SARS³¹ spread across Asia and it seemed our lives were at risk. Who knew who would be infected? Regulations were strictly enforced. Our mouths were covered by medical masks and our feet were tied by being forbidden to leave school.

The school staff organized movies on weekends to amuse us. One was a Korean love story. I didn't feel like watching the characters crying all the time, and neither did Dorjee Tso.

I was dumbfounded when Dorjee Tso asked if I would forget her one day. I said I would not. By then, every facial feature, her body, and personality were etched in my heart. Not a trace of my ex-girlfriend lingered.

She smiled and said she loved my answer. I did not ask or understand why she asked me. Then a week after she asked that question, my world changed. I left her behind as Lebo had left me.

On a Sunday morning before the movie began, a classmate was ordered by our headmaster to gather all the students. He said it was urgent. We all waited for the headmaster to arrive. The headmaster came into the class with three men some time later and briefly introduced the strangers and the purpose of their visit:

These gentlemen are from Qinghai Normal University, the school from which I graduated. There is a special

³¹ Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome is a respiratory disease in humans. A pandemic between November 2002 and July 2003 resulted in about 8,000 known infected cases and nearly 800 confirmed human deaths.

department in that school that teaches English. It is free, including food and transportation. We need the five best students from this class to be interviewed, but only three can go. Write names on a piece of paper. Choose carefully!

Dorjee Tso looked at me from her desk. Our eyes met like two rivers. Retracting my eyes, I wrote on a piece of paper, "Dorjee," who was the number one student in my class. I thought about writing Dorjee Tso's name, since her math was excellent. But I remembered that one of the strangers had said our main subjects would be the social sciences, not math, chemistry, and physics. I waited, holding the paper. I was nervous, thinking I might be one of the five students. I was not the best, but I was the second best sometimes. One of the visitors collected all the papers. In the end, I was one of the five students. We were taken into the headmaster's office to translate between Tibetan and Chinese, and given an oral interview, and a test of confidence. Having finished these difficulties, I felt like I had finished running a marathon. The air was pleasant outside the office, and the wind was gentle. Yet, there was still uneasiness since the strangers would only announce the names after thirty minutes.

•••

Two months later I was at a bus stop waiting for a bus to take me to Xining City, the capital of Qinghai Province. The anxiety of getting there flashed into my mind but soon disappeared. The thoughts of my home people's expectations frightened me. I was a representative, a dream, and a hope for and of all those I left behind.

Before I left, Mother had said, "Son, I am not sure if you going to Xining is a wise choice. I doubt if that language is useful." There were reasons for this, including Mother's reluctance to my being far from home. Before I decided to study English, a lama from the local monastery divined to

see which school best suited me – Qinghai Normal University or Hongyuan Tibetan Middle School. He didn't tell me but later I heard the result was that it would be best if I remained at Hongyuan Tibetan Middle School.

Thus I found myself in Xining learning English in the autumn of 2003. I had come with great hopes and expectations from a small, remote community in north Sichuan Province to a city. I vowed not to disappoint my parents and sisters who were herding on the grassland, and determined to learn as much as I could.

I met students from Lhasa, Gansu, Yunnan, and Qinghai in my new class. I was lucky to be among so many special, talented students. I felt much pressure. I had problems understanding the dialects of those from other Tibetan areas, which often forced us to use English or Chinese to communicate outside class.

Beginning from the English alphabet, we all dedicated our time and energy to learning English, rather like horses racing down a field, each trying to get ahead of the other horses. The most difficult aspect of learning English for me was pronunciation. It was as hard as saying Tibetan tongue twisters. But, as I learned IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet), I could read English words by myself, instead of always asking my teachers to pronounce words.

I was able to easily communicate with my foreign teachers after a year, which brought me joy. As time passed, I also learned how to do language preservation, cultural preservation, and environmental protection projects. This made me realize that English provided many tools to help others.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

A

Adag, ཨ་སྟག། A stag

Amchok, ཨ་མཚོག། A mchog, An qu 安曲

Amdo, ཨ་མདོ། A mdo, An duo 安多

Ami, ཨ་མའི། A ma'i

Amilolo, ཨ་མའི་ལོ་ལོ། A ma'i lo lo

Ayi Tsomo, ཨ་ཡེ་མཚོ་མོ། A ye mtsho mo

B

Balden, དཔལ་ལྷན། Dpal ldan

Balden Tsering, དཔལ་ལྷན་ཆེ་རིང་། Dpal ldan tshe ring

Barkam, འབར་ཁམས། 'Bar khams, Ma'erkang 马尔康

C

Chabudag, རྩ་བདག། Khyab bdag

Chenrizig, སྤྱན་རས་གཟིགས། Spyen ras gzigs

Chojee, ཆོས་རྗེ། Chos rje

Chomkun, ཆོམ་རུན། Chom rkun

D

Darkho, དར་ཁོ། Dar kho
 Dazan, ལྷ་ཟན། Zla zan
 Degkardron, དགུགས་དཀར་སྒོན། Gdugs dkar sgron
 Delek Drolma, བདེ་ལེགས་སྒོན་མ། Bde legs sgron ma
 Dorjee, འོ་རྟེ། Rdo rje
 Dorjee Tso, འོ་རྟེ་མཚོ། Rdo rje mtsho
 Drimed Kundan, གྲི་མེད་ཀུན་ལྷན། Dri med kun ldan
 Drolma, སྒྲོལ་མ། Sgrol ma
 Dugbum, ལྷག་འབུམ། Stag 'bum
 Dundrub, འོན་འབྲུབ། Don 'grub
 Durfa, དུར་ཕ། Dur h+pha

G

Gaji, ཀ་ཅི། Ka ci
 Gansu, ཀན་སུའུ། Kan su'u, Gansu 甘肃
 Garto, དཀར་ཐོ། Dkar tho
 Gawi Lodro, དགའ་བའི་ལྷོ་གྲོས། Dga' ba'i blo gros
 Gesar, གེ་སར། Ge sar
 Guanyin, ལུགས་རྗེ་ཆེན་པོ། Thugs rje chen po
 Gya Shirab, རྒྱ་ཤེས་རབ། Rgya shes rab
 Gza, གཟའ། Gza'

H

Hamta, ཏམ་མཐའ། Ham mtha'
 Han 汉, རྒྱ། Rgya
 Hongyuan 红原, རྒྱ་ཁོག། Rka khog

J

Jiagongma, སྐུ་འགོ་མ། Skya 'go ma
 Jiangrong 江茸, སྐུ་རོང་། Skya rong
 Jidchu, སྐུ་ཅུ། Skyid chu
 Jyambal, འཇམ་དཔལ། 'jam dpal

K

Kagyu, བཀའ་བརྒྱུད། Bka' brgyud
 Kaldan, སྐལ་ལྷན། Skal ldan
 Kālacakra, དུས་ཀྱི་འཁོར་ལོ། Dus kyi 'khor lo
 Kunga Gyaltsan, ཀུན་དགའ་རྒྱལ་མཚན། Kun dga' rgyal mtshan

L

labtse, ལབ་རྩེ། lab rtse
 Lebo, ལུ་པོ། Klu po
 Lhasa, ལྷ་ས། Lha sa
 Ling, ལྷིང་། Gling
longdha, ལྷང་རྟ། rlung rta

M

majee, མ་གྱི། ma gyi
mani, མ་ཐི། ma Ni
 Mao Zedong 毛泽东
 Martang, ཀ་ཁོག། Rka khog, Hongyuan 红原
mecha, མེ་ཆ། me cha
 Milarepa, མི་ལ་རས་པ། Mi la ras pa
 Murghe, དམུ་དགེ། Dmu dge, Song pan 松潘

N

Namchin, ནམ་མཁྱེན། Rnam mkhyen
 Norzin, ལོ་རྩེན། Nor 'dzin
 Ngawa, ར་བ། Rnga ba, Aba 阿坝
 Nyimajid, ཉི་མ་སྐུད། Nyi ma skyid
 Nymdrin, ནམ་འདྲེན། Rnam 'dren

O

om ma ni padme hum, ཨོཾ་མ་ཤི་བདེ་ཏུ། *oM ma Ni pad+me hUM*
 Oser, འོད་ཟེར། 'od zer

P

Padma, པད་མ། Pad ma
 Pal pe, དཔལ་པེ། Dpal pe
 Porhu, བོ་རོ། Bo ros
 Potala, པོ་ཏ་ལ། Po ta la

Q

Qiang, Qiangzu 羌族, ཟང་རིགས། ChAng rigs
 Qinghai 青海, མཚོ་ཁྲོན། Mtsho sngon

R

ra mda' rgyugs, ར་མདའ་རྒྱུགས། *ra mda' rgyugs*
 Renchin, རིན་ཆེན། Rin chen
 Renchintso, རིན་ཆེན་མཚོ། Rin chen mtsho
 Rigtsa, རིག་མཚོ། Rig mtsho
 Ringko, བཟང་ཁོ། Bzang kho
 Rka khog, དཀར་ཐང་།

Rongri, རོང་རུ། Rong ru
Rongrima, རོང་རུ་མ། Rong ru ma

S

serzam, གསེར་ཟམ། gser zam
Shirab, ཤེས་རབ། Shes rab
Shirabtso, ཤེས་རབ་མཚོ། Shes rab mtsho
Sichuan ཡུ་ཤུལ།, ཟེ་ཁྲོན། Zi khron
Sonam, བསོད་ནམས། Bsod nams

T

Tashi Dundrub, བཟ་ཤེས་དོན་འབྱུང། Bkra shis don 'grub
Tashi Rabdin, བཟ་ཤེས་རབ་བརྟན། Bkra shis rab brtan
Teggye Chinbo, ཐུགས་རྗེ་ཆེན་པོ། Thugs rje chen po
Tenzen, བསྟན་འཛིན། Bstan 'dzin
Tenzen Tsering, བསྟན་འཛིན་ཆེ་རིང་། Bstan 'dzin tshe ring
thangka, ཐང་ཀ། thang ka
thuma, གཏོས་མ། gtos ma
tsa tsa, ཨ་ཨ། tsha tsha
tsamba, རྩམ་པ། rtsam pa
Tsang, ཨང་། tshang
Tseko, ཆེ་ལོ། Tshe kho
Tsering Nyamgyal, ཆེ་རིང་རྣམ་རྒྱལ། Tshe ring rnam rgyal
Tso dun, ཆོ་བདུན། Tsho bdun
Tso Jyab, ཁྲོ་སྐུབས། Khro skyabs
Tsowo, ཁྲོ་བོ། Khro bo

W

Wangchin, དབང་ཆེན། Dbang chen

Winba, བུམ་པ། Bum pa

X

Xining, ཟི་ལིང་། Zi ling, 西宁

Y

yado, ཡ་དོ། ya do

yedam, ཡི་དམ། yi dam

Yunnan ཡུ་ནན་ཡུ་ལྷོ། 云南

Z

Zangko, བཟང་ཁོ། Bzang kho

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